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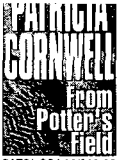

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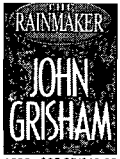

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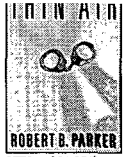

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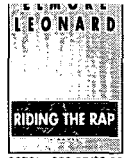

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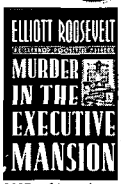

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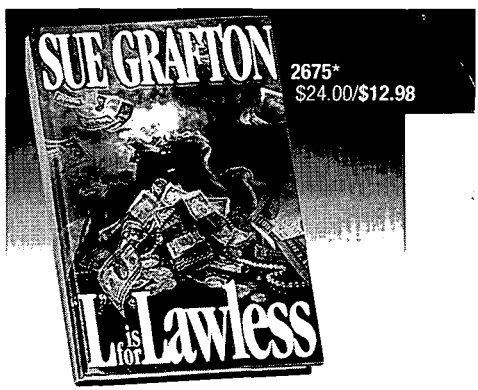

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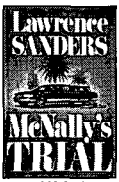

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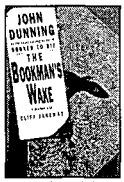

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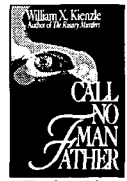

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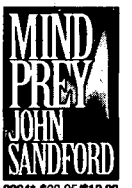

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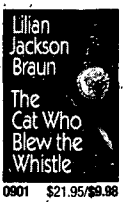

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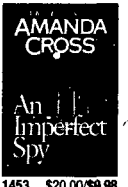

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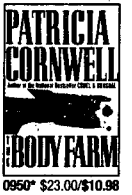

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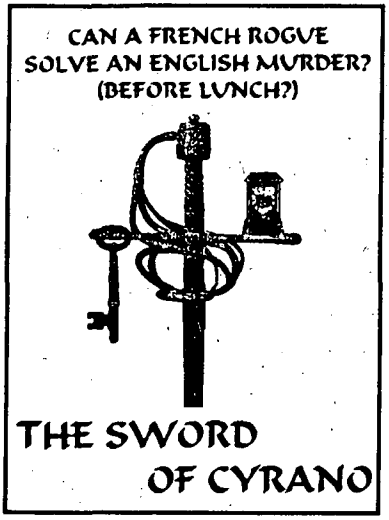

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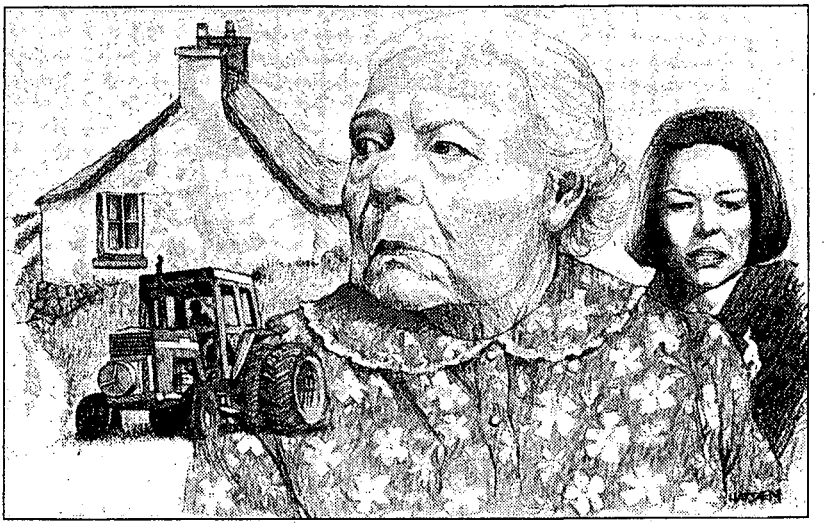

Art by Laurie Harden

BURNING END

by Ruth Rendell

After she had been doing it for a year, it occurred to Linda that looking after Betty fell to her lot because she was a woman. Betty was Brian's mother, not hers, and Betty had two other children, both sons, both unmarried men. No one had ever suggested that either of them should take a hand in looking after their mother. Betty had never much liked Linda, had sometimes hinted that Brian had married beneath him, and once, in the heat of temper, said that Linda was "not good enough" for her son, but still it was Linda who cared for her now. Linda felt a fool for not having thought of it in these terms before.

But she knew she would not get very far talking about it to Brian. Brian would say—and did say—that this was women's work. A man couldn't perform intimate tasks for an old woman, it wasn't fitting. When Linda asked why not, he told her not to be silly, everyone knew why not.

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"Suppose it had been your dad that was left, suppose he'd been bedridden, would I have looked after him?"

Brian looked over the top of his evening paper. He was holding the remote in his hand but he didn't turn down the sound. "He wasn't left, was he?"

"No, but if he had been?"

"I reckon you would have. There isn't anyone else, is there? It's not as if the boys were married."

Every morning after Brian had gone out into the farmyard and before she left for work, Linda drove down the road, turned left at the church into the lane, and after a mile came to the very small cottage on the very large piece of land where Betty had lived since the death of her husband twelve years before. Betty slept downstairs in the room at the back. She was always awake when Linda got there, although that was invariably before seven-thirty, and she always said she had been awake since five.

Linda got her up and changed the incontinence pad. Most mornings she had to change the sheets as well. She washed Betty, put her into a clean nightgown and clean bedjacket, socks, and slippers, and while Betty shouted and moaned, lifted and shoved her as best she could into the armchair she would remain in all day. Then it was breakfast. Sweet milky tea and bread and butter and jam. Betty wouldn't use the feeding cup with the spout. What did Linda think she was, a baby? She drank from a cup, and unless Linda had remembered to cover her up with the muslin squares that had indeed once had their use for babies, the tea would go all down the clean nightgown and Betty would have to be changed again.

After Linda had left her and gone off to work, the district nurse would come, though not every day, not for certain. The

The *New York Times* recently said of Ruth Rendell: "Her books often feature uncannily sympathetic portraits of troubled characters. . . . Many of them suffer from delusional romantic obsession, a sense of injustice, or a single misstep that spirals out of control." Sometimes, however, her fiction deals with the dilemmas of ordinary people, like the long-suffering wife in "Burning End."

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Meals-on-Wheels lady would come and give Betty her midday dinner, bits and pieces in foil containers, all labelled with the names of their contents. At some point Brian would come. Brian would "look in." Not to *do* anything, not to clear anything away or give his mother something to eat or make her a cup of tea or run the vacuum cleaner around—Linda did that on Saturdays—but to sit in Betty's bedroom for ten minutes smoking a cigarette and watching whatever was on television. Very occasionally, perhaps once a month, the brother who lived two miles away would come for ten minutes and watch television with Brian. The other brother, the one who lived ten miles away, never came at all except at Christmas.

Linda always knew if Brian had been there by the smell of smoke and the cigarette end stubbed out in the ashtray. But even if there had been no smell and no stub she would have known because Betty always told her. Betty thought Brian was a saint and an angel to spare a moment away from the farm to visit his old mother. She could no longer speak distinctly, but she was positively articulate on the subject of Brian, the most perfect son any woman ever had.

It was about five when Linda got back there. Usually the incontinence pad needed changing again and often the nightdress too. Considering how ill she was, and partially paralysed, Betty ate a great deal. Linda made her scrambled egg or sardines on toast. She brought pastries with her from the cakeshop or, in the summer, strawberries and cream. She made more tea for Betty, and when the meal was over, somehow heaved Betty back into that bed.

The bedroom window was never opened. Betty wouldn't have it. The room smelt of urine and lavender, camphor and Meals-on-Wheels, so every day on her way to work Linda opened the window in the front room and left the doors open. It didn't make much difference but she went on doing it. When she had got Betty to bed she washed up the day's teacups, emptied the ashtray and washed it, and put all the soiled linen into a plastic bag to take home. The question she asked Betty before she left had become meaningless because Betty always said no, and she hadn't asked it once since having that conversation with Brian about whose job it was to look after his mother, but she asked it now.

"Wouldn't it be better if we moved you in with us, Mum?"

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Betty's hearing was erratic. This was one of her deaf days.

"What?"

"Wouldn't you be better off coming to live with us?"

"I'm not leaving my home till they carry me out feet first. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Linda said all right and she was off now and she would see her in the morning. Looking rather pleased at the prospect, Betty said she would be dead by the morning.

"Not you," said Linda, which was what she always said, and so far she had always been right.

She went into the front room and closed the window. The room was furnished in a way which must have been old-fashioned even when Betty was young. In the center of it was a square dining table, around which stood six chairs with seats of faded green silk. There was a large, elaborately carved sideboard but no armchairs, no small tables, no books, and no lamps but the central light which, enveloped in a shade of parchment panels stitched together with leather thongs, was suspended directly over the glass vase that stood on a lace mat in the absolute center of the table.

For some reason, ever since the second stroke had incapacitated Betty two years before, all the post, all the junk mail, and every freebie news-sheet that was delivered to the cottage ended up on this table. Every few months it was cleared away, but this hadn't been done for some time, and Linda noticed that only about four inches of the glass vase now showed above the sea of paper. The lace mat was not visible at all. She noticed something else as well.

It had been a warm sunny day, very warm for April. The cottage faced south and all afternoon the sunshine had poured through the window, was still pouring through the window, striking at the neck of the vase so that the glass was too bright to look at. Where the sun-struck glass touched a sheet of paper a burning had begun. The burning glass was making a dark charred channel through the sheet of thin printed paper.

Linda screwed up her eyes. They had not deceived her. That was smoke she could see. And now she could smell burning paper. For a moment she stood there, fascinated, marvelling at this phenomenon which she had heard of but had never believed in. A magnifying glass to make boy scouts' fires, she thought,

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and somewhere she had read of a forest burnt down through a piece of broken glass left in a sunlit glade.

There was nowhere to put the piles of paper, so she found another plastic bag and filled that. Betty called out something but it was only to know why she was still there. Linda dusted the table, replaced the lace mat and the glass vase, and, with a bag of washing in one hand and a bag of wastepaper in the other, went home to do the washing and get an evening meal for Brian and herself and the children.

The incident of the glass vase, the sun, and the burning paper had been so interesting that Linda meant to tell Brian and Andrew and Gemma all about it while they were eating. But they were also watching the finals of a quiz game on television and hushed her when she started to speak. The opportunity went by and somehow there was no other until the next day. But by that time the sun and the glass setting the paper on fire no longer seemed so remarkable and Linda decided not to mention it.

Several times in the weeks that followed Brian asked his mother if it wasn't time she came to live with them at the farm. He always told Linda of these attempts, as if in issuing this invitation he had been particularly magnanimous and self-denying. Perhaps this was because Betty responded very differently from when Linda asked her. Brian and his children, Betty said, shouldn't have to have a useless old woman under their roof, age and youth were not meant to live together, though nobody appreciated her son's generosity in asking her more than she did. Meanwhile Linda went on going to the cottage and looking after Betty for an hour every morning and an hour and a half every evening and cleaning the place on Saturdays and doing Betty's washing.

One afternoon while Brian was sitting with his mother smoking a cigarette and watching television, the doctor dropped in to pay his twice-yearly visit. He beamed at Betty, said how nice it was for her to have her devoted family around her, and on his way out told Brian it was best for the old folks to end their days at home whenever possible. If he said anything about the cigarette, Brian didn't mention it when he recounted this to Linda.

He must have picked up a pile of junk mail from the doormat and the new phone book from outside the door, for all this was

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lying on the table in the front room when Linda arrived at ten to five. The paper had accumulated during the past weeks, but when Linda went to look for a plastic bag she saw that the entire stock had been used up. She made a mental note to buy some more and in the meantime had to put the soiled sheets and Betty's two wet nightdresses into a pillowcase to take them home. The sun wasn't shining; it had been a dull day and the forecast was for rain, so there was no danger from the conjunction of glass vase with the piles of paper. It could safely remain where it was.

On her way home it occurred to Linda that the simplest solution was to remove not the paper but the vase. Yet, when she went back next day, she didn't remove the vase. It was a strange feeling she had, that if she moved the vase to the mantelpiece, say, or the top of the sideboard, she would somehow have closed a door or missed a chance. Once she had moved it she would never be able to move it back again, for though she could easily have explained to anyone why she had moved it from the table, she would never be able to say why she had put it back. These thoughts frightened her and she put them from her mind.

Linda bought a pack of fifty black plastic sacks. Betty said it was a wicked waste of money. When she was up and about she had been in the habit of burning all paper waste. All leftover food and cans and bottles got mixed up together and went out for the dustman. Betty had never heard of the environment. When Linda insisted, one hot day in July, on opening the bedroom windows, Betty said she was freezing, Linda was trying to kill her, and she would tell her son his wife was an evil woman. Linda took the curtains home and washed them but she didn't open the bedroom window again, it wasn't worth it, it caused too much trouble.

But when Brian's brother Michael got engaged, she did ask if Suzanne would take her turn looking after Betty once they were back from their honeymoon.

"You couldn't expect it of a young girl like her," Brian said.

"She's twenty-eight," said Linda.

"She doesn't look it." Brian switched on the television. "Did I tell you Geoff's been made redundant?"

"Then maybe he could help out with Betty if he hasn't got a job to go to."

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Brian looked at her and shook his head gently. "He's feeling low enough as it is. It's a blow to a man's pride, that is, going on the dole. I couldn't ask him."

Why does he have to be asked, Linda thought. It's his mother. The sun was already high in the sky when she got to the cottage at seven-thirty next morning, already edging round the house to penetrate the front-room window by ten. Linda put the junk mail on the table and took the letter and the postcard into the bedroom. Betty wouldn't look at them. She was wet through and the bed was wet. Linda got her up and stripped off the wet clothes, wrapping Betty in a clean blanket because she said she was freezing. When she was washed and in her clean nightdress, she wanted to talk about Michael's fiancée. It was one of her articulate days.

"Dirty little trollop," said Betty. "I remember her when she was fifteen. Go with anyone, she would. There's no knowing how many abortions she's had, messed all her insides up, I shouldn't wonder."

"She's very pretty, in my opinion," said Linda, "and a nice nature."

"Handsome is as handsome does. It's all that makeup and hair dye as has entrapped my poor boy. One thing, she won't set foot in this house while I'm alive."

Linda opened the window in the front room. It was going to be a hot day, but breezy. The house could do with a good draught of air blowing through to freshen it. She thought: I wonder why no one ever put flowers in that vase, there's no point in a vase without flowers. The letters and envelopes and newsprint surrounded it so that it no longer looked like a vase but like a glass tube inexplicably poking out between a stack of paper and a telephone directory.

Brian didn't visit that day. He had started harvesting. When Linda came back at five, Betty told her Michael had been in. She showed Linda the box of chocolates that was his gift, his way of "soft-soaping" her, Betty said. Not that a few violet creams had stopped her speaking her mind on the subject of that trollop.

The chocolates had gone soft and sticky in the heat. Linda said she would put them in the fridge but Betty clutched the box to her chest, saying she knew Linda, she knew her sweet tooth, if she let that box out of her sight she'd never see it again.

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Linda washed Betty and changed her. While she was doing Betty's feet, rubbing cream round her toes and powdering them, Betty struck her on the head with the bedside clock, the only weapon she had to hand.

"You hurt me," said Betty. "You hurt me on purpose."

"No, I didn't, Mum. I think you've broken that clock."

"You hurt me on purpose because I wouldn't give you my chocolates my son brought me."

Brian said he was going to cut the field behind the cottage next day. Fifty acres of barley, and he'd be done by midafternoon if the heat didn't kill him. He could have seen to his mother's needs, he'd be practically on the spot, but he didn't offer. Linda wouldn't have believed her ears if she'd heard him offer.

It was hotter than ever. It was even hot at seven-thirty. Linda washed Betty and changed the sheets. She gave her cereal for breakfast and a boiled egg and toast. From her bed Betty could see Brian going round the barley field on the combine, and this seemed to bring her enormous pleasure, though her enjoyment was tempered with pity.

"He knows what hard work is," Betty said, "he doesn't spare himself when there's a job to be done," as if Brian were cutting the fifty acres with a scythe instead of sitting up there in a cabin with twenty kingsize and a can of Coke and the Walkman on his head playing Beatles songs from his youth.

Linda opened the window in the front room very wide. The sun would be round in a couple of hours to stream through that window. She adjusted an envelope on the top of the pile, moving the torn edge of its flap to brush against the glass vase. Then she moved it away again. She stood, looking at the table and the papers and the vase. A brisk draught of air made the thinner sheets of paper flutter a little. From the bedroom she heard Betty call out, through closed windows, to a man on a combine a quarter of a mile away, "Hallo, Brian, you all right then, are you? You keep at it, son, that's right, you got the weather on your side."

One finger stretched out, Linda lightly poked at the torn edge of the envelope flap. She didn't really move it at all. She turned her back quickly. She marched out of the room, out of the house, to the car.

* * *

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The fire must have started somewhere around four in the afternoon, the hottest part of that hot day. Brian had been in to see his mother when he had finished cutting the field at two. He had watched television with her and then she said she wanted to have a sleep. Those who know about these things said she had very likely died from suffocation without ever waking. That was why she hadn't phoned for help, though the phone was by her bed.

A builder driving down the lane, on his way to a barn conversion his firm was working on, called the fire brigade. They were volunteers whose headquarters was five miles away, and they took twenty minutes to get to the fire. By then Betty was dead and half the cottage destroyed. Nobody told Linda, there was hardly time, and when she got to Betty's at five it was all over. Brian and the firemen were standing about, poking at the wet black ashes with sticks, and Andrew and Gemma were in Brian's estate car outside the gate, eating potato crisps.

The will was a surprise. Betty had lived in that cottage for twelve years without a washing machine or a freezer and her television set was rented by Brian. The bed she slept in was her marriage bed, new in 1939, the cottage hadn't been painted since she moved there, and the kitchen had last been refitted just after the war. But she left what seemed an enormous sum of money. Linda could hardly believe it. A third was for Geoff, a third for Michael, and the remaining third as well as the cottage, or what was left of it, for Brian.

The insurance company paid up. It was impossible to discover the cause of the fire. Something to do with the great heat, no doubt, and the thatched roof, and the ancient electrical wiring which hadn't been renewed for sixty or seventy years. Linda, of course, knew better, but she said nothing. She kept what she knew and let it fester inside her, giving her sleepless nights and taking away her appetite.

Brian cried noisily at the funeral. All the brothers showed excessive grief, and no one told Brian to pull himself together or be a man, but put their arms round his shoulders and told him what a marvellous son he'd been and how he'd nothing to reproach himself with. Linda didn't cry but soon after went into a black depression from which nothing could rouse her, not the doctor's tranquillizers, nor Brian's promise of a slap-up holiday somewhere, even abroad if she liked, nor people telling her Betty

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hadn't felt any pain but had just slipped away in her smoky sleep.

An application to build a new house on the site of the cottage was favourably received by the planning authority, and permission was granted. Why shouldn't they live in it, Brian said, he and Linda and the children? The farmhouse was ancient and awkward, difficult to keep clean, just the sort of place Londoners would like for a second home. How about moving, he said, how about a modern house, with everything you want, two bathrooms, say, and a laundry room, and a sun lounge? Design it yourself and don't worry about the cost, he said, for he was concerned for his wife, who had always been so practical and efficient as well as easygoing and tractable, but was now a miserable, silent woman.

Linda refused to move. She didn't want a new house, especially a new house on the site of that cottage. She didn't want a holiday or money to buy clothes. She refused to touch Betty's money. Depression had forced her to give up her job but, although she was at home all day and there was no old woman to look after every morning and every evening, she did nothing in the house and Brian was obliged to get a woman in to clean. Brian could build his house and sell it, if that was what he wanted, but she wouldn't touch the money and no one could make her.

"She must have been a lot fonder of Mum than I thought," Brian said to his brother Michael. "She's always been one to keep her feelings all bottled up, but that's the only explanation. Mum must have meant a lot more to her than I ever knew."

"Or else it's guilt," said Michael, whose fiancée's sister was married to a man whose brother was a psychotherapist.

"Guilt? You have to be joking. What's she got to be guilty about? She couldn't have done more if she'd been Mum's own daughter."

"Yeah, but folks feel guilt over nothing when someone dies, it's a well-known fact."

"It is, is it? Is that what it is, doctor? Well, let me tell you something. If anyone ought to feel guilt, it's me. I've never said a word about this to a soul. Well, I couldn't, could I? Not if I wanted to collect the insurance; but the fact is it was me set that place on fire."

"You what?" said Michael.

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"It was an accident. I don't mean on purpose. Come on, what do you take me for, my own brother? And I don't feel guilty, I can tell you, I don't feel a scrap of guilt, accidents will happen and there's not a thing you can do about it. But when I went in to see Mum that afternoon, I left my cigarette burning on the side of the chest of drawers. You know how you put them down, with the burning end stuck out. Linda'd taken away the damned ashtray and washed it or something. When I saw Mum was asleep, I just crept out. Just crept out and left that fag end burning. Without a backward glance."

Awed, Michael asked in a small voice, "When did you realise?"

"Soon as I saw the smoke, soon as I saw the fire brigade. Too late then, wasn't it? I'd crept out of there without a backward glance." ●

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Sitting Ducks

by Katherine H. Brooks

The man and the woman, so brutally slain,
Had summered for years on an island in Maine.
Till a native discovered their bodies, with shock,
As cold as the mackerel that lie on the dock.
They'd often been seen on inflatable floats,
Exploring the waters—examining boats,
But their rafts were now punctured, as well as their lungs,
And something like lobster was found on their tongues,
Which wasn't surprising. They ate it a lot.
Though nobody knew where the lobster was bought.

They had drifted awhile, but had never been missed,
And the holes in their backs were as large as your fist.
When people collected, it captured the eye
Of two in a lobster boat, pottering by,
And one of them glanced at the point of his spear,
The other inspected his snorkeling gear
And peeked at the decoys he'd hidden from view—
A couple of ducks that the tubes fitted through.
They smiled in a way that was typically "Maine,"
With a quiet complacency hard to explain.

It smacked of a vengeance, unfitting, perhaps,
For a caper so small as the robbing of traps,
But those who are sure that the ocean is kind,
And all that's beneath it, should bear it in mind
That, in view of the manner the tragedy struck,
It's wise to be wary of trusting a duck.
There's also a moral. It's stupid to steal
The fruits of the lobsterman's pot, for a meal,
Since there's always a chance, in exchange for such gall,
He'll use you as bait on another day's haul.

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A Craving for Chinese

by Edward D. Hoch

A generation ago the job of department store promotions head might not have seemed likely to bring with it adventure, intrigue, and a sufficient supply of murderers and victims. But Mr. Hoch has tapped into a fact of modern life, the international nature of most big business, including retail, and he's set his amateur detective, Susan Holt, on the road, to countries across the globe and to locations in the U.S. where murder waits just around the bend. †

From his office above the entrance to the main building of the state prison, Warden Chester Coyne could always hear the demonstrators on an execution night. They started early, before nightfall, with their chants and songs and speeches, and kept it up until confirmation came that the execution by lethal injection had been carried out, usually sometime after midnight.

On this night in late November he'd been deluding himself that the turnout might be smaller than usual. The condemned man was white and middle-class, with a particularly brutal murder on his record. He wasn't some disadvantaged youth from the inner city, lured into violence by the easy money of drugs. But by six o'clock they were out there, lighting little bonfires against the night chill, settling in for another countdown.

There was a knock on the warden's door and Captain DeMarco, in command of death-row guards, entered without waiting for the standard invitation. DeMarco was like that, and sometimes it annoyed Chester Coyne. "What is it, Captain?"

"I asked Feltzer what he wanted for his last meal. He says Chinese food."

Warden Coyne sighed. They couldn't prepare that in the prison kitchen. "All right. Send out for it."

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"Which place?"

"Whatever is closest. Make sure there's tight security when they deliver it."

Chinese food!

When he was alone again Coyne stared at the telephone on his desk. The red phone was a direct line to the governor's office, but he knew there'd be no pardon tonight. The death penalty had been one of several issues in the recent election campaign, and the governor's support of it had been one of the factors in his reelection.

Coyne glanced at the typewritten schedule on his desk. David Feltzer was scheduled for his last meal at eight-thirty P.M. He had requested a visit from his wife and his brother at ten o'clock, and at eleven he would be visited by the Catholic chaplain of the prison. Shortly after midnight, pursuant to the warrant for his execution, he would be taken from his cell to the death chamber, strapped to a gurney, and fitted with an intravenous tube that would introduce a sedative into his body. At some point in the proceedings, after the condemned man was asleep, the designated executioner would add a lethal dosage to the tube. Death would be quick and painless.

The warden turned and stared out at the growing crowd beyond the prison gates. All those who opposed capital punishment should be able to die so peacefully!

Shortly after eight o'clock Captain DeMarco returned, giving his usual perfunctory knock. "The Chinese food is here. Want to come with me?"

"Sure," Chester Coyne said. It would be the last time the warden would see Feltzer until he was led into the execution chamber. This was the part he hated, seeing and comforting a man who would soon be dead, but he viewed it as part of his duty. Capital punishment was easy to support in the abstract, a bit more difficult when you were speaking to the condemned man from just a few feet away.

David Feltzer was forty-five years old now, though he'd been only thirty-three at the time of the murder. He'd been unemployed and desperate when he passed a note to a bank teller and took the packet of money she handed him. It was an exploding dye-pack, and it had gone off moments later as he reached the bank parking lot. Enraged and desperate, and covered with red ink, he'd seized a young high-school girl named Meagan

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Brady and dragged her into his car as a hostage. The only witnesses had been across the street, unable to help, but one of them did get his license number.

The girl's body had been found a few hours later in a country ditch. She'd been shot in the head. Feltzer was apprehended by state police that night, fleeing through the southern part of the state. He offered no resistance and, in fact, signed a confession, claiming the police had deprived him of sleep during twelve hours of questioning. It had taken the jury only half that long to find him guilty and recommend the death penalty.

Feltzer's wife and brother had stuck with him through a number of hearings and appeals. He'd admitted the robbery but insisted he'd dropped the girl off unharmed. No one really believed him, least of all Warden Coyne. As he entered the condemned cell now with Captain DeMarco he still harbored a distaste for the man.

"We've brought your Chinese dinner as you requested, Feltzer," he said, stepping out of the way as DeMarco placed the containers of food on the small table a guard had brought in. The guard would remain with him while he ate.

David Feltzer had grown thin and pale during his twelve years of imprisonment. He looked especially bad this night, which was to be expected. They never looked good during these final hours. "Thanks, Warden," he muttered without meeting their eyes. He stared at the plastic knife and fork the prison had provided, then at the wooden chopsticks that had come with the food.

"Your wife and brother will be here at ten," Coyne told him. "The chaplain will come at eleven. You'll have an hour with him."

The prisoner nodded, apparently deciding to use the chopsticks. "It'll be good to see them." He emptied the containers onto paper plates.

"Is there anything else you'd like with your meal?" DeMarco asked.

"This is fine." He took a bit of food and seemed to grimace slightly. He took another portion between the chopsticks and brought it to his mouth. Coyne decided he was probably out of practice with the chopsticks. The third portion got away from him, falling to the floor.

"Never mind," the warden told him. "We'll get it."

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remembering a previous occasion when she'd been forced to fight off his unwanted advances. He'd behaved himself around the office since then, but here they were on a trip together and the memory of last time was all too clear. She decided to check the newspaper for a nearby movie.

The newspaper account of David Feltzer's death was hardly satisfactory. It hinted that police were still investigating the circumstances, trying to determine how the condemned man had gotten the poison. There had been no ruling of suicide as yet.

"Why would he commit suicide when the state was going to kill him in a few hours anyway?" Brentnor asked as they relaxed over a cocktail in the hotel bar.

"Some people have," Susan pointed out. "Goering did."

"Who?"

"Hermann Goering, Hitler's right-hand man during World War Two, commander in chief of the German air force. He swallowed a poison pill a few hours before he was to be hanged as a war criminal. Don't you know your history?"

"I have a tough enough time with modern stuff." He chewed on a lemon slice that had come with his drink. "What's on the schedule for tonight?"

"I think I'll look for a nearby movie I haven't seen."

"Hey, this isn't Manhattan! In these burgs the movies are all out at the malls."

He was right, of course, as she discovered when she glanced through the entertainment pages. They ended up having dinner together and then she made a hasty escape to her room.

In the morning they showed up at Simon Feltzer's office at the Brookline store. The appointment had been set for ten o'clock, but when they got there they discovered Feltzer was in a meeting with a detective investigating his brother's death.

Simon Feltzer himself was a rumpled man of about forty, with thinning hair and thick glasses. He didn't look like any sort of department-store executive, but then Susan was probably judging him in New York terms. He met them at the door with a beefy man who was introduced as Detective Sergeant Green. The sergeant nodded to Susan and said, "Sorry to delay your meeting like this. I have to check in with headquarters and then I'll be back for just a minute."

"We can start our meeting in the meantime," Simon Feltzer assured them. "Come on in."

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David Feltzer raised his eyes to Coyne for the first time. "I think I'm going to—"

Then he slumped over the table, knocking the paper plate to the floor.

Captain DeMarco was at his side, trying to lift him. After a moment he gave up and looked at Chester Coyne. "He's dead, Warden. I think he's taken poison."

It was Susan Holt's bad luck to arrive in West Caroline two days after the death of David Feltzer. She'd flown there because her employer, Mayfield's of Manhattan, had just completed an agreement to purchase Brookline, a chain of department stores headquartered in West Caroline. She and Mike Brentnor had come down from New York to help plan the special store promotions to be held when Brookline changed its name to Mayfield's in six months.

"We'd like to have the new name in place for the Easter selling season," Brentnor had explained to Brookline's top executive, a gray-haired man named Ziegler. "But that would only give us four months."

"Not enough time," Ziegler decreed. Susan had already decided he was not the sort one argued with. "We need at least six months. Call it the end of May."

"That would be satisfactory," Susan said quickly, before Mike could disagree. "We'll want to meet with your promotions manager for some preliminary planning."

"That would be Simon Feltzer, but you'll have to wait till tomorrow. Simon buried his brother this morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Was it sudden?"

"Well, yes and no. He was awaiting execution for murder and he killed himself a few hours earlier."

"My God!" Mike Brentnor said. "How—?"

Ziegler cut further questions short with a wave of his hand. "You can read about it in the morning paper. We have business to discuss here."

As they drove back to their hotel, Susan grumbled, "What a cold fish! Simon Feltzer must have a great time working for him."

"We'll have to pick up a paper and read about it."

Susan shrugged. "We've got nothing better to do till tomorrow morning." She was dreading the evening with Mike Brentnor,

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The blond wood furniture in the little office seemed a holdover from a few decades back. Susan sat across the desk from Feltzer and immediately began to remove schedules and ad layouts from her attaché case. "I was sorry to hear about your brother," she said sympathetically. "It must have been a terrible shock."

"Well, not really," the man said. "Mildred and I have been expecting it for twelve years, so to speak."

"He was on death row that long?"

"Counting the trial and everything. Let's see—I'm thirty-nine now. I was a callow youth of twenty-seven at the time, bumming around without a job. David was my older brother, driving a newspaper delivery truck until he got laid off. Mildred was pregnant and he was desperate for money. That's what made him do it."

"The paper said he'd killed a girl," Mike Brentnor said without feeling. He might have been discussing the weather.

"I still can't understand that part. He must have gone a little crazy."

"Mildred was his wife?" Susan asked.

Simon Feltzer nodded. "She stuck by him all these years, never remarried. A nice woman. The shock of David's arrest caused her to lose the child."

Before Susan could say anything else there was a tap on the door and Sergeant Green returned. "Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to tell you, Mr. Feltzer, that they've reviewed the results of the autopsy and the preliminary investigation. Your brother's death is being listed as a homicide. Somebody poisoned that Chinese dinner."

The news had left Simon Feltzer speechless, and when Sergeant Green departed Susan Holt was the first to speak. "Why would anyone poison a man about to be executed?" she wondered. "I suppose there's some slight rationale for suicide—a desire to control one's own destiny, to cheat the executioner as Goering did—but what would be the motive in murdering someone about to die after twelve years in prison?"

"I wish I knew," Feltzer said softly, barely breathing the words.

"It doesn't really concern us," Mike Brentnor decided, trying to steer the conversation back to business. "Now about the opening promotion, I was thinking of a tropical-bird motif—"

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"I—I'm sorry," Feltzer said. "This has been quite a shock."

It wasn't the first time Susan's job had involved her in a murder case. "I might be able to help if you told me something of the circumstances," she offered. "I could try, anyway." Brentnor shot her a look which she chose to ignore. Certainly Simon Feltzer was no good to them in his present state of mind.

"I've told the police what little I could," he said. "I visited my brother frequently during his imprisonment, but it wasn't as if he was free. I suppose his fellow inmates had become his friends."

"On death row they're pretty well segregated from the rest of the prison population," Susan said. Then she thought about it and asked, "Could you give me the name and address of his wife? Maybe if I went to see her I could learn something."

Mike Brentnor objected. "Susan, we're here to plan the merger promotion—"

"You two can get started on it while I talk to her."

Feltzer seemed to agree. "At the funeral yesterday she told me she'd help in any way she could. I don't think she ever believed it could have been suicide." He checked his Rolodex and wrote down an address and phone number for Susan. "She's still Mildred Feltzer. She never went back to her maiden name."

Susan took the slip of paper and gave Mike a wave. "I'll see you back at the hotel later."

Mildred Feltzer had an apartment in a middle-class neighborhood of West Caroline. Susan phoned first and asked if she could come over. It was something about her late husband, she said, not giving details.

"Are you a reporter?" Mildred asked suspiciously.

"No. I'm working with David's brother. He gave me your address."

"All right," she agreed after the briefest of hesitations. "I'll be expecting you."

Mildred was a stout woman with a lined face that must have been very pretty twelve years earlier. Now, with ageing and the weight gain, she was sinking into unattractive middle age. "Hello, Mrs. Feltzer. I'm Susan Holt."

"Come in and sit down, and please, call me Millie. I'm Millie to my friends. My husband was always Dave. Simon's the only one who ever called us David and Mildred."

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"Thank you," Susan responded, taking a seat on a worn sofa. "This must have been a difficult twelve years for you."

"It's been a difficult lifetime. I'm used to it by now. I can never forgive Dave for what he did, to the poor girl and to me, but I've lived through it."

"The police are convinced now that he was deliberately poisoned."

"I know. Sergeant Green stopped by to tell me a short time ago."

"Why would anyone kill Dave at such a time, just before his execution?"

"I think it was some sort of horrible accident. I told the sergeant he should be investigating that Chinese restaurant."

"Did your husband like Chinese food?"

"Sure. He often told me that was one of the things he missed in prison."

"You stuck by him through the trial and everything even though you knew he was guilty of this terrible crime?"

Millie Feltzer frowned, perhaps considering how to answer the question. "At first I thought he was innocent. I thought the whole thing was some horrible mistake that would be cleared up in a few days. I even started keeping a scrapbook of the newspaper articles so we'd have a record of the wrong Dave had suffered."

"A scrapbook? I'd like to see that if I could."

"I suppose it would be all right now. It's history of a sort, now that he's dead." She went over to a bookcase that held a couple of scrapbooks along with a few paperback volumes. At least one was an astrology guide. Susan wondered whether a better day was coming soon for Millie Feltzer.

She opened the first scrapbook and saw the headline: "Girl Taken Hostage by Bank Robber." Then, "Missing Girl Found Dead; Suspect Apprehended." The following day there was a typical newspaper photograph of the accused man in handcuffs being hustled into the courthouse for arraignment, his face partly hidden. "Tell me about it," Susan requested.

"I was pregnant at the time and it was my last week at the bakery. In those days there wasn't any pregnancy leave, at least not where I worked. Dave had lost his job delivering papers and he was pretty depressed about it. Everything was coming apart at the worst possible time. When I told him we needed some

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money he said he'd get some. He stopped by the bakery in the early afternoon and that's the last I ever saw of him as a free man." She was staring at the floor, remembering it.

"When did you learn of the robbery?"

"That was a funny thing. I was listening to the radio news while I was driving home around four. They reported a bank robbery across town—a masked gunman who escaped in a Toyota. About a half-hour later two police officers came to the door. They were investigating a bank robbery and asked about Dave's car. A witness had spotted the license number. Right away I remembered the news report and said it couldn't be his car because his was a Chevy, not a Toyota. But this was a different bank robbery, and a teenage girl had been taken as a hostage." She broke down in tears then, and Susan turned to the scrapbooks for what happened next.

The girl, Meagan Brady, had been found shot to death in a ditch that evening. A few hours later state police had spotted David Feltzer's Chevy at a truck stop and arrested him without incident. The murder weapon was not recovered, although the dye-stained money was. At first Feltzer admitted the bank robbery but denied killing the girl, saying he'd let her out alive, along the road. The following day, under intensive police questioning, he signed a statement admitting he'd shot her when she started yelling for help. He later tried to recant the statement but it was used in evidence at his trial.

While Millie was recovering her composure Susan Holt glanced through the second scrapbook, taking in the long sad story of endless appeals and attempts to gain a new trial. Finally the state supreme court had ruled there were no grounds for a stay of execution, and the governor had made it clear there would be no clemency. That was where the second scrapbook ended.

"Suicide?" Millie repeated in answer to Susan's next question. "No, he never mentioned suicide. I think he always expected the governor would relent at the last minute and commute his sentence to life in prison. I knew it wouldn't happen, but I didn't expect this."

"Did he have a favorite Chinese restaurant?"

She shrugged. "That was more than twelve years ago. The one we went to most often closed long ago."

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Susan could think of no more questions. She rose and shook hands with Millie Feltzer. "Thank you for what you've told me, Millie. Could I borrow these scrapbooks till tomorrow?"

"Sure, but what are you looking for?" she asked. Susan paused at the door, but she couldn't answer that. She didn't know herself.

Her rented car was parked on the street, and she knew she should be getting back to the hotel where Brentnor would be waiting. But her plans suddenly changed when she saw Sergeant Green walk across the street to intercept her. He must have remained in his unmarked car after telling Millie the verdict on her husband's death. He'd witnessed Susan's arrival and awaited her departure.

"May I speak with you, Miss Holt?"

"I suppose so."

He came around to the passenger side and got in next to her. "You seem unduly interested in the death of David Feltzer. Might I ask why?" His stocky body filled the seat but somehow he seemed more friendly than frightening.

"I handle promotions for Mayfield's of Manhattan. We've recently merged with your local Brookline chain and I'm here to work with Simon Feltzer for a few days on our joint promotion plans. Naturally he's very upset about the circumstances of his brother's death. I thought I might help by trying to find some answers."

"What did you learn from Mildred Feltzer?"

"That she likes to be called Millie."

His eyes narrowed just a bit and she regretted her flippancy immediately. He was a man who took his job seriously. "What did she say about her husband?"

"Only that he wouldn't have committed suicide. What makes you think he was murdered?"

"The warden and the captain of the guard were with him all the time he was eating. They saw nothing unusual. And an examination of the Chinese dinner shows that the poison, a cyanide compound, was all through the food. David Feltzer didn't swallow a capsule of it, nor did he manage to sprinkle a little on top of his egg foo yung."

"So someone at the restaurant must have done it."

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"So it seems. Though Captain DeMarco, who ordered the meal, swears he never mentioned it was for the condemned man. It might have been for the warden."

"Which restaurant prepared it?"

"The Lucky Dragon. It's about a half-mile from the prison. DeMarco says he chose that one because it was closest. The state prison is actually outside the city."

"I was wondering about that," Susan said. "Bank robbery is a federal crime. Why was Feltzer in a state rather than a federal prison? And why are you investigating a murder outside the city limits?"

"We have a metropolitan government in West Caroline, and the state specifically asked our help on this case. As for the federal charges, a judge ruled twelve years ago that since the kidnapping took place outside the bank, the two crimes were separate. The federal authorities allowed us to try Feltzer first on the more serious murder charge and we obtained a conviction." He smiled a bit. "Does that answer all your questions, Miss Holt?"

"You've questioned the people at the Lucky Dragon?"

"Of course."

"Could the poison have been added at the prison?"

Green shook his head. "The food was in closed containers delivered directly to the captain of the guard. He got the warden and they delivered the dinner to the condemned man together. I don't see how it could have been tampered with."

"Who else would have visited David Feltzer that night, before his execution?"

"His wife and brother, and the Catholic chaplain. Of course he was dead before they saw him."

"I'll let you know if I find anything," Susan promised, hoping he would take the hint and leave her car.

"That's generous of you." His voice carried more than a trace of irony. "But I can't have you impeding our investigation. This is no place for amateurs."

"I'll stay out of your way," Susan promised.

"Good. We understand each other." He got out of the car, but as she drove away she could see him in the rearview mirror, watching her.

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Susan phoned the hotel and told Mike Brentnor she'd been delayed. "How'd you make out with Feltzer?"

"Not bad. He settled down after a while. I think he likes the tropical-bird idea. When will you be back?"

"I want to make one more stop."

"Maybe we could have lunch together."

"I don't think so, Mike."

"You're being a detective again, aren't you?"

"Just a bit."

She hung up and found the address of the Lucky Dragon in the phone book. The restaurant did a fair lunch business, which surprised Susan. She'd always thought of Chinese food as a dinnertime option. The manager was a neatly dressed man named Charlie Osko, and he spoke with her as he folded boxes for takeout orders. "What is it you wish to know?" he asked.

"It's about the death at the state prison the other night. I understand the condemned man ate a meal prepared here."

"I can tell you nothing I have not already told the police."

"Did you work that night?"

Osko was growing nervous. "Yes, I was here as you see me now, handling takeouts."

"Then you packaged the prison order."

"Yes, just like any other."

"Who delivered it?"

"We employ two part-time drivers for delivery. The prison run was made by Nieh Yuan."

"Is he here now?" Susan asked.

The man smiled about something and replied, "Making deliveries to office buildings. He'll be back soon."

Susan stood to one side, watching the manager's routine. As the takeout orders came out of the kitchen, he checked them against his list and placed them in white paper bags, writing the destination in pencil on a slip of paper he clipped to the top of each bag. Then he divided them carefully into two groups, according to location. After a few minutes, a Chinese-American youth came in from a delivery. "Got the next batch ready, Pop?" he asked.

"Right here."

Susan took a step forward but Charlie Osko shook his head. "Not Yuan. This is my son, learning the business."

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The son departed with four orders and Osko was distracted by the ringing telephone. While he took down the information for a reservation, Susan went up and checked the bags behind his back. Today there were none for the state prison.

A young woman of about twenty entered, a high-cheekboned beauty who hurried to the counter and grabbed up the remaining bags. Nieh Yuan had returned.

"Miss Yuan?" Susan asked.

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

"I'm interested in the dinner you delivered to the state prison earlier this week."

"I told the police nobody stopped me, nobody poisoned it while it was in my car."

"Did you have any other deliveries on the same trip?"

"Just one. Most of the others had been earlier. I delivered the food to the prison first because Mr. Osko said it was important."

"What did you do with it at the prison?"

"Captain DeMarco was waiting for me at the gate. He took it."

"Do you know him personally?"

"He calls about once a month, usually when he's on the night shift."

"Did he get any food that night?"

"There was only one meal. I didn't know who it was for until later."

Susan could see that a visit to the prison was unavoidable.

She called first and asked to speak with Captain DeMarco. Explaining that she was working with Simon Feltzer, she requested a brief meeting with the captain. Perhaps he thought she was a lawyer. In any event, he agreed to give her fifteen minutes if she could come out right away.

A guard took her to DeMarco's office on the second floor of the prison's administration building. DeMarco was a tall, muscular man with a square jaw and hard eyes. She decided he'd found the right line of work. "I'll only take a few minutes of your time," she promised. "I need to know what happened to that Chinese dinner after it arrived here."

"Is Feltzer's brother thinking of suing the state?"

"I can't comment on that."

DeMarco took out a stick of gum and popped it into his mouth. "Nothing happened to it. I took it from this Chinese girl who delivered it and went up to the warden's office. We never opened

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it until we were in the cell with the condemned man."

"And no one could have tampered with the food during that time?"

"Certainly not!"

"Do you still think he killed himself?"

"I suppose he must have."

"The police are saying it was murder."

"I heard that. I don't believe it."

"Who decided to get the Chinese dinner from the Lucky Dragon?" Susan asked.

"Warden Coyne told me to order it from the closest place. I'd had Chinese sent in from the Lucky Dragon and I knew that was closest."

"Tell me, was David Feltzer ever in any trouble during his stay here?"

"No more so than any death-row prisoner. They think they can get away with anything, but we soon straighten them out here."

Susan remembered something else. "While I'm here I'd like to speak with the chaplain if I could."

"Well, I don't know about that. Let me ring up Warden Coyne."

Five minutes later, Susan met the warden. He was a bit older than DeMarco, and possibly a bit more intelligent. "I understand you're a lawyer, Miss Holt."

"No, I never said that. I said I was working with Simon Feltzer. Actually, I'm in promotions."

DeMarco's face reddened. "Then you can just promote yourself out of here, young lady! What's your game, anyway?"

"The truth. That's never a game."

Warden Coyne removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Why do you want to see Father McGee?"

"Whether it was suicide or murder, there has to be a motive. The chaplain might be able to suggest one."

The warden turned to Captain DeMarco. "See if Father McGee is available. She can speak with him here, in your presence." He started for the door, then remembered to say, "I hope that will be satisfactory, Miss Holt."

"Perfectly."

DeMarco made the call and went back to his paperwork. Presently Father McGee appeared, a small white-haired man who spoke with a trace of an Irish accent.

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"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Holt," he told her. "I understand that you know David's brother."

"I'm working with him. I came in from New York to help with the merger plans."

"Yes, the merger. It's big news here in West Caroline. I hope it doesn't hurt employment."

"I'm sure it will benefit the entire region," she answered diplomatically. "I was wondering if you could tell me anything about David's last days. What was his mood like?"

"Are you hoping to comfort his brother?"

"Perhaps. Do you know Simon?"

The priest shook his head. "Nor David's wife. I never met either one. He talked of them, of course."

"Did he ever talk of the crime, of this girl Meagan Brady whom he kidnapped and killed? I'm not asking you to violate the seal of the confessional—"

"David Feltzer never confessed to me. He was not a Catholic, though I think I was able to offer him some spiritual guidance. He told me he wanted to write out a statement when I visited him for the final time, in case he didn't survive his execution."

"Didn't survive—?"

"David was not an educated man. He had an idea that if he took some sort of antidote before his execution it would counteract the effects of the lethal injection. He'd seen an old movie once on late-night television about a man who was revived after being put to death in the electric chair. I assured him the doctor would have to certify his death before his body was removed."

"So he was finally prepared to die?"

"I think so." Father McGee hesitated. "Comforting men like David Feltzer is a very difficult part of my job here. Like my Church, I am opposed to capital punishment."

"Would you have sanctioned his suicide?"

"No, of course not."

Captain DeMarco stood up. "I think that's all the time we can grant you, Miss Holt."

"I'm finished. Thank you, Father McGee."

"It was a pleasure speaking with you."

A guard escorted Susan to the front gate.

By the time she returned to their hotel, Mike Brentnor had gone out again, leaving her a message that he was over at the

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Brookline store with Feltzer. It was getting past midafternoon and Susan opted to wait until morning for another business session. Instead she turned her attention to the scrapbooks she'd borrowed from Millie Feltzer.

The first day's reports of the bank robbery and kidnapping were sketchy. It wasn't until the second day, when the press focused on the shocking nature of the crime and started more extensive coverage, that the paper ran a sidebar interview with the bank teller. The man had handed her a note saying he had a bomb and would blow them both up unless she gave him all her hundred dollar bills. She handed over a dye-pack triggered to explode in two minutes. He'd made it to the parking lot when it went off, enveloping him in red dye and smoke. Teenaged Meagan Brady, on her way into the bank, had been grabbed as a shield by the robber and forced into his car. When the state police apprehended David Feltzer that night, he still had stains from the dye on his hands and face and clothing.

Susan turned over several pages quickly, until she came to the accounts of Feltzer's trial. No bomb was ever found, nor was the murder weapon located, and Feltzer recanted his confession to the girl's murder. But the evidence was overwhelming. The teller identified him as the bank robber, and the bank's security cameras had caught him as well. Several witnesses across the street had seen him force the girl into the car, and one of her shoes had been found in the backseat. The dye-stained money was recovered from his car, and from the beginning he had admitted the robbery. He only denied that he had killed Meagan Brady after first admitting it. As the District Attorney commented at the time, he changed his story when he realized he could get the death penalty.

She turned to the final pages of the second scrapbook, but there were no clippings about David Feltzer's death. The ending of the story, for her, remained a blank.

Susan puzzled over it and went back through the pages again. She was convinced the motive for David Feltzer's murder lay deep in the past. But what motive? Could a relative of the murdered girl be so obsessed with revenge that he was not content with capital punishment administered by the state? That seemed doubtful. Such a person would want to kill Feltzer with his bare hands, or with a gun, not with a quick-acting poison he could not even watch.

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Or could he watch it? Warden Coyne and Captain DeMarco had been in the cell at the time. Might one of them—?

No, if they wanted vengeance the death chamber was only hours away, with no risk to them.

Then she remembered something the priest had said. She backtracked through the conversations in her mind, saw again the Lucky Dragon restaurant where the food had been prepared, and considered the possibilities. An idea began to form itself in her mind. No evidence, nothing but an idea.

She opened drawers in the hotel room until she found one containing envelopes and writing paper. Did people still write letters from hotel rooms? Apparently some did. She folded the sheet of paper and slid it into an envelope which she sealed.

There was a knock on the door. She looked through the peephole and saw Simon Feltzer. "Just a minute!" she called. Then, after a pause, "Come in, Mr. Feltzer. I was just thinking about you."

He settled down in one of the chairs, tossing his blue trenchcoat on the bed. "I finished up with Mike and thought I'd see if you were back."

"I just got in," she told him. "I was out at the prison talking to the warden and the chaplain." She picked up the sealed envelope, careful not to show the back with its hotel logo on the flap. "Father McGee says your brother left him this envelope for the police. I'm to give it to Sergeant Green."

"I'll take it," Feltzer said, reaching for the envelope.

"No, his instructions were to give it only to the police."

"Then why would he give it to you, a woman he doesn't even know?"

"I have no idea."

Simon Feltzer didn't fully believe her, but he couldn't take any chances. He went over to the bed and yanked the belt from his trenchcoat with one quick motion. Susan was on her feet, running for the door, when he grabbed her arm and whirled her around, the belt looping easily around her neck. "You meddled in this too much," he growled, and pulled the belt tight.

"Don't—!"

There was a pounding on the door and the grip on her throat loosened for a split second. Then it tightened again as the door burst open and two burly men pulled him away from her. She

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coughed, gasping for breath, and finally managed to speak. "I called hotel security before I opened the door, Mr. Feltzer. If you killed Meagan Brady and your own brother, I figured you wouldn't hesitate with me."

Later they met in Mr. Ziegler's office, with Sergeant Green and Mike Brentnor both in attendance. "I only want to tell it once," Susan said, "so I figured we should all be here. The whole thing hinged on motive, of course. Why would anyone poison a condemned man about to be executed by lethal injection? It couldn't have been an accident, not with that much cyanide spread throughout the Chinese meal. Suicide was also out of the question. He had no opportunity to poison the food with the warden and captain of the guard watching him. So it was murder. In revenge for killing the girl? Why take the risk when the state was doing the job? In revenge for something that happened in prison? Same objection. Financial gain? All the killer had to do was wait till midnight. The risk involved in poisoning the food—and I'll explain that in a minute—meant that it had to be done. It was no mere whim."

"Why did it have to be done?" Sergeant Green asked.

"What was David Feltzer going to do before he died? Meet with his brother and his wife, and the prison chaplain. My first thought was that he was going to make a dying confession to another murder. It's not that unusual among condemned prisoners. And Father McGee confirmed that David Feltzer wanted to leave a statement with him. I assumed it was for the police, and that was what I faked in my hotel room. Simon Feltzer took the bait too well, and tried to kill me. It confirmed what I'd suspected—that David was killed because someone feared a last-minute confession."

"A confession that he killed someone else?"

"No," Susan said softly. "A confession that he never killed anyone. Think about it. Is there the slightest confirmation of this in the facts of the Meagan Brady case? Yes, there is. No one doubts that David Feltzer panicked after robbing the bank and kidnapped the girl. But did he kill her? Feltzer's note to the bank teller threatened a bomb, not a gun. No gun was mentioned, no gun was seen. Why would Feltzer threaten to explode a bomb, a far-fetched threat at best, when he could mention the ver real gun, and even show it? Was the answer that he had no g

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Surely his story of letting the girl out of the car alive could not be believed. Even in her frightened state she'd have taken her shoe for the long hike ahead. She died in Feltzer's presence, but if he didn't shoot her, who did? He was alone in the bank, apparently alone in the car. If he had an accomplice, what would that accomplice have been doing while he robbed the bank?"

"What?" Mike Brentnor asked.

"Robbing another bank!"

"Another—"

"Millie Feltzer told me there was another bank robbery at the same time, carried out by a masked gunman. There was the gun, the missing gun! The two bank robbers met as planned after the robberies, probably to divide the loot. The second robber, the gunman, hadn't expected the girl. She'd seen too much, so he shot her. Who was this second gunman? Someone very close to David Feltzer, because he confessed to the killing at first. Even after changing his mind, he never implicated this person. He was going to the death chamber this week without revealing that name. For twelve years he'd kept the secret. Only two people in the world were that close to him—his brother Simon and his wife Millie. Would Millie, quite pregnant at the time, have murdered Meagan Brady in cold blood? Of course not! And she was working at her bakery job at the time of both robberies. Millie could not have done it, either physically or psychologically. Then how about Simon? Twelve years ago he was bumming around without a job, to use his own words."

Sergeant Green shook his head uncertainly. "You still have to tie him in to the poisoning and tell me how he did it."

Susan thought she could do just that. "Consider this. If Simon or any outsider poisoned the food, it had to be done at the Chinese restaurant. The delivery girl had no way of knowing it was for the condemned man. Who would David have told in advance that he had a craving for Chinese food at his last meal? Again, either his brother or his wife. Simon could easily have known the request would be made, and that it would be phoned to the only Chinese restaurant anywhere near the prison. He went to the Lucky Dragon that night, ordered a meal of egg foo yung to [illegible]d poison in the parking lot. Then he went back [illegible]vaiting for someone, until he saw a bag addressed [illegible]rison lined up to be delivered. While the owner [illegible]one or otherwise diverted, Simon switched bags,

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clipping the state prison note to his poisoned meal. I tried it myself, going up to the bags while the owner was taking a reservation. He never noticed me."

"I'd never believe it if he hadn't tried to kill you," the detective said. "As it is, we might just get a confession out of him. I can't believe, though, that David Feltzer would keep quiet about this for twelve years, taking the blame for his brother."

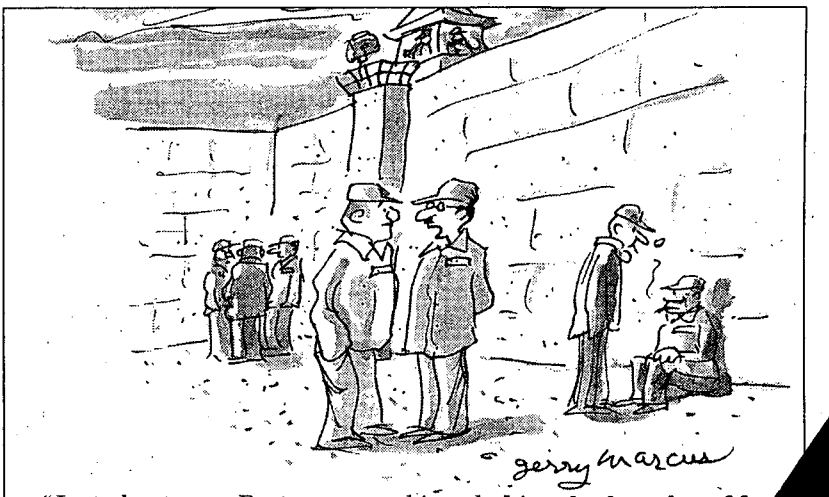
"What would it have gotten him to tell the truth?" Susan pointed out. "He was still an accessory to a felony murder, still facing a death penalty. I doubt if he would have told the priest anything, in the end. I think he would have protected Simon right into the death chamber. But Simon wasn't willing to risk that."

After they arranged to start over again with Ziegler the following morning, Mike Brentnor said, "I hope we can get through this merger without your finding any more mysteries to solve."

"I'll try," Susan told him.

"How about dinner tonight?"

"You know, you might tempt me with some Chinese food." ●



"Just about now, Bert, our guard is unlocking the front door, Mr. Hendricks, our president, is in his office, the tellers take up their positions accompanied by the rattle of coins emptying into the drawers, now a flurry of customers enter, and for the first ti twenty-two years I'm not there to juggle the books."

A CRAVING FOR CHINESE: Edward D. Hoch

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Art by Ron Chironna

A Man in a Million

by Dorothy Simpson

Right from that first moment at the bus stop I knew that Alex was special. If I close my eyes I can still remember it so clearly—the rain beating down like steel rods and me gasping, with my hair plastered to my scalp and my blue dress, the Laura Ashley one with puffed sleeves and a dropped waistline, clinging to me in a way that was, well, not quite nice, if you know what ...ean.

...uddenly, there he was with this huge black umbrella, ...jacket. It was ever so romantic, just like one of ...ies where the heroine meets a tall, dark, ...he moment they set eyes on each other ...iat's it, the story ends to the sound of ...lex wasn't exactly a stranger. Not that ...t I'd seen him, noticed him, that is, in the ...work. And he'd noticed me, too, you can

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always tell, can't you, but of course I hadn't encouraged him because, well, you shouldn't, should you, not if you're a nice girl? At least, that's what my mum always said, and I dare say she's right. I sometimes think that nowadays all you have to do is smile at a man and that's it, he thinks you're ready to jump into bed with him. Well, anyway, that's not the sort of girl I am and believe me it's not easy these days sticking to your principles and I've had to put up with an awful lot of teasing—and worse—but the nice thing about Alex, one of the nice things I mean, was that he was actually pleased that I wasn't, well, easy, in that way.

Anyway, there he was, offering me his umbrella. "I hope you don't mind," he says, "but you do look so very wet and if you'd like to share this with me . . . My name's Brent, by the way, Alex Brent."

"Oh thanks," I says. "And I'm Rosamund Cooper."

"I know," he says. And then he blushed—well, if he didn't blush—and I must admit it was a bit dark under that umbrella—he had the sort of look that said he would be blushing if he were the sort of man who did, if you see what I mean. Because we both knew, of course, that this meant he must have inquired about me, to know who I was.

Anyway, we started chatting. I said I'd never seen him waiting for the bus here before and he explained that his car was being serviced and he wouldn't be getting it back until the next day. He'd really been hoping to get a taxi, but since the rain began they all seemed to have disappeared. If one did turn up, he said,

The author of the popular Luke Thanet mystery series, published in the U.S. by Scribner's, Dorothy Simpson has made three previous appearances in *EQMM*. (11/77, 3/80, 4/87) She began to write in 1975 after a long illness and quickly fixed on a series of books featuring a sensitive Kentish police detective. The Thanet books are by no means police procedurals. Like her new short story for *EQMM*, they explore human psychology and the quirks and oddities that lead to crime.

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he hoped I would allow him to escort me home because really if I wasn't careful I'd be getting pneumonia and that wouldn't do at all. And then, just on cue, as if it had been waiting around the corner, one appeared. I said no, I couldn't possibly let him do that, it was sure to be out of his way, but he was very insistent—in the nicest possible way, of course—and almost before I knew what was happening there we were, sailing along in style and my goodness, I must admit I was glad to sit back and watch all those less fortunate people dashing for the underground with newspapers over their heads like a lot of water rats racing for their burrows.

Well, as I say, that was how it all began and you can see straightaway what I mean about Alex being special. He was so kind, so thoughtful, so considerate. And the amazing thing was, he was always like that. I mean, with some people, you find that as soon as you get to know them better, all their nasty habits start showing themselves and before you know where you are, you're wondering why on earth you thought they were so nice in the first place. But I can honestly say that except on that last, awful day, I never knew Alex to get cross with me, or raise his voice, or be impatient. And because he was like that, I went along with what he wanted even if, well, I must admit it, it wasn't always what I wanted. But then, that's what happens when you love someone, isn't it? You try to please them. And especially if you know they're trying to please you. Even if . . . Well, I'll give you an example.

I'd always wanted a white wedding. Well, most girls do, don't they, and if ever they think about their wedding day they imagine themselves floating up the aisle in a dream of a white dress and the whole thing—the organ playing, the wedding guests nodding and smiling, the flowers, and the waiting bridegroom all combine to make it the most wonderful, memorable day of a girl's life. So naturally that was what I wanted, quite desperately. For me it was to be the perfect, crowning moment of a perfect courtship.

Unfortunately, Alex didn't feel the same way.

"Darling Rosebud," he said, taking my hands and looking straight into my eyes with that really, well, *melting* look he had, "it would be far too exhausting for you. You wouldn't want our honeymoon to be ruined, would you, because you were too tired to enjoy it? No," he said in that masterful way of his, as I opened

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my mouth to say I wouldn't mind as long as the wedding had been the one I'd always dreamed of having, "no, I couldn't let you. We'll have a quiet ceremony in the registry office and then, if you like, a reception at the Ritz. On me, of course."

The Ritz! He knew I'd always wanted to go to the Ritz for lunch or dinner or even tea, for that matter, and now . . . Well, it was typical of Alex to come up with a suggestion like that. I was so stunned I couldn't say a word for a minute and then, before I could say how kind of him it was, how generous, but I'd really rather have my white wedding in church after all, he'd taken my silence to mean yes, I agreed, and he was laughing and hugging me and saying he'd known I'd be pleased. I just didn't have the heart to tell him the truth and after that, well, the moment had gone, passed, and it was too late. So you see what I mean, don't you? He was always so kind and thoughtful, so overwhelmingly generous, that it seemed ungrateful to say no thank you, I don't want what you're offering, I really would prefer something else.

I'll give you another example. It was exactly the same when it came to choosing somewhere to live. Mum and me had always lived in a flat, in one of those big tower blocks, and I'd always dreamed of living in a house. Nothing too grand, you understand, just a smallish house with perhaps three bedrooms and a bit of garden where I'd be able to put the pram when baby came along, somewhere nice but reasonably close to central London like Wimbledon or Blackheath. But Alex wanted a flat in town. He didn't want to waste all that time traveling, he said, when he could be with me within twenty minutes of leaving the office. Besides, it would be much more convenient shopping in the West End, and for theatres and dinners and so on. And what was more, he'd just seen the very thing, he was just waiting to show it to me to see if I liked it before signing on the dotted line.

So off we went, with him talking enthusiastically about it all the way and me wondering how I was going to break the news that it wasn't at all what I had in mind, no, not at all. It was in Docklands and of course, it was gorgeous, if you like that sort of thing, all glass and balconies overlooking the river and the sort of kitchen I didn't know existed outside magazines.

"What do you think?" he said. "Isn't it beautiful? I knew you'd love it."

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What could I say? I suppose I should have put my foot down, made my point, but it would have seemed so ungrateful, wouldn't it? He'd even found someone to clean it for me.

"You'll be a lady of leisure," he said, still with the same look on his face, sort of glowing with delight. "You'll be able to sit here and watch the boats going up and down the river and make yourself look beautiful for when I get home in the evening."

"I thought we'd be able to travel home from work together," I said.

"Work?" he said. He looked surprised, really surprised. "But there won't be any need for you to work, my love. I'm earning more than enough for both of us, believe me. You'll never have to worry your pretty little head about money again."

Stop working? I hadn't even considered it. Not until the babies came, anyway. And I liked my job, enjoyed the company of the other girls. "But what would I do with myself all day?" I said.

"Be a lady of leisure, as I said. Relax. Enjoy yourself."

"Oh, but . . ."

"Just think!" he said. "It'll be a wonderful life. I couldn't bear to think of you slaving away over a typewriter all day, and what for? No," he said as I opened my mouth to say my job was more than that, much more, and before I could say a word he'd swept me into his arms and whispered, "Besides, I want you all to myself. Is that so selfish of me? It'll be wonderful, you'll see. I want my wife to have everything in the world she wants or needs."

And he made sure I did. After a marvelous honeymoon in New York (over on Concorde, back on the QE2, no less!) we settled down in the flat, and every single day he bought me a present. Sometimes it was no more than a bunch of violets, sometimes a beautiful piece of glass or porcelain which had caught his fancy, sometimes a piece of jewellery and once, on my birthday, a full-length mink coat.

"He's a man in a million," my mother said when I showed her the coat. "You've really landed on your feet. You just don't know how lucky you are."

"Even presents begin to pall after a while," I said, "if they arrive on the dot of six every day, without fail. Oh, it was exciting enough at first, but now . . ."

"Honestly," she said, tossing her head in that way she has, "there's no pleasing some people, that's for sure. Most women

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wateringly tender, and the sauce was a dream. Even the pastry had turned out right—short, with the apples all cinnamony, the way Alex liked them. Afterwards he insisted on doing the washing up and brought the coffee in on a tray.

"Well," he said, "I must congratulate you, darling. That was a wonderful meal. However did you learn to cook like that?"

I smiled. "Classes. I've been going for months." I was pretty well hugging myself with delight, I can tell you. At last I had found something to do, something I enjoyed, something I was really good at. Mentally I was already planning the next day's menu. Soupe bonne femme, perhaps, followed by a juicy fillet steak and . . .

"You're very quiet," said Alex. "Tired?"

"A bit, I suppose."

He smiled at me, picked up my hand, put my fingers to his lips, and kissed them. Then he frowned.

"What's the matter?"

"Your hand smells of onions."

"I put some in the au gratin, for extra flavour."

His mouth went sort of tight, in that way it does when he's put out, but he didn't say anything for a while, just sipped his coffee. Then he put the cup down with a click, as if he'd made up his mind about something, and said, "Don't you like my cooking?"

"Alex, yes! Of course I do! It's just that . . ."

"Well then, what's wrong with the arrangement we've had so far?"

I told him I didn't like to think of him coming home from work and then having to prepare our dinner, when I'd been home all day doing nothing, and that anyway I felt it was nice to have something constructive to do during the day and I'd thought if I learned to cook he'd be pleased, proud of me, even.

I don't think he heard a word I said.

"You're getting tired of me," he said. And his face began to droop, to fold into lines I'd never seen before, lines of misery and despair.

I sat up with a jerk. "Darling, that's not true! You're the best, the kindest, the most generous man in the world."

"But?"

"What do you mean, 'But'?"

"You were going to say 'But.' I heard it in your voice."

"No," I said desperately. "That's not true. You're imagining it."

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would be down on their knees giving thanks for a man like that."

"I know," I said. "And I don't mean to be ungrateful. But . . ."

"Then don't be!" she said.

The other thing I found hard to cope with was that the cleaner Alex had found was so efficient that there really wasn't enough for me to do. In the end I decided I'd go all out to learn to cook. I couldn't, you see. Mum had always cooked at home and I'd never got around to learning. I didn't know a patty tin from a casserole. I'd discovered that Alex, who'd had his own flat before we were married, was a superb cook and after my first few pathetic attempts, he just took over. He even used to do the shopping, on the way to or from work, because he was always the one who knew what he was planning for dinner. So I thought I'd surprise him and I started going to cookery classes on Wednesday afternoons. It made a change, got me out of the flat, and I even made some friends—well, not friends exactly, but acquaintances I could have a cup of tea with after class was over, that sort of thing.

Well, I surprised myself, I really did; turned out to be the star pupil! So after about six months I felt confident enough to try and surprise him. I planned a special meal—iced watercress soup (it was summer) followed by chicken breasts in a wine and mushroom sauce, with au gratin potatoes and petits pois. Followed by apple pie, which I knew was one of his favourites. I opened a bottle of wine, and by the time he came home everything was ready.

"Hullo, what's this?" he said when he came into the huge room which was our sitting room and dining room combined. The table was all laid and I'd lit the candles. "A celebration?"

"In a way." I gave him a long, lingering kiss. "I've got a surprise for you. You go and shower and then we'll eat."

"I'll just go and put this in the kitchen," he said, holding up the bag of shopping. "And get the vegetables prepared."

I took the bag from him. "No. I'll see to it. Please, Alex."

He looked at me for a minute and then laid his hand against my cheek. "What have you been up to?" he said. "Your face is burning."

"Alex, please. Do as I ask, or you'll spoil my surprise."

"Okay," he said. And shrugged and went off, a bit reluctantly.

I'd timed it all with care, as I'd been taught to do, and everything was perfect. The soup was delicious, the chicken mouth-

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"Promise?"

"Truly."

He gave me a long, serious look, as if he was trying to work out whether or not I meant what I was saying, then suddenly he smiled. "Good," he said. Then he put his arm around me, pulled me to him, and kissed me.

"Darling," he said, after a while.

"Mmm?"

"Look, I don't want to put the damper on your enthusiasm, but I honestly can't see what was wrong with the way we were doing things before."

I pulled away from him a little. "I told you. It's just that when I'm here alone all day, well, time seems to go rather slowly, that's all."

"But you could find plenty to do if you tried, surely. Reading, knitting, sewing, embroidery, watching television . . . Or you could go out. There's the whole of London to choose from—cinemas, art galleries, museums, shopping. . . . I mean, I don't want to be tactless, my love, but just look at you tonight!"

I put my hand up to my hair and suddenly remembered that I'd been concentrating so hard on my cooking that I'd forgotten to do my face.

He watched me realise and then said, "You see?" He took my hands and kissed the tips of each of my fingers in turn. "I don't like to think of these getting red and rough from washing up or peeling vegetables when I'm perfectly capable of knocking together a meal in no time, when I get home from work. I like to think of you making yourself beautiful for me, so that in the evening you're relaxed, smelling of perfume instead of garlic, my own beautiful, special little wife. I don't want you turning into a cabbage of a housewife, more concerned with the texture of her Brussels sprouts than of her skin. . . . Which reminds me—" He fished in his pocket and pulled out a box. "Thought I'd forgotten, didn't you?"

I didn't say that I was sick of reading, that I'd always hated knitting, and anyway what was the point because I could go out and buy anything I wanted to buy, that if I watched any more soap operas I would start to scream and throw things about. . . . I just smiled and took the perfume (expensive, of course, I now had a dozen bottles of different brands, all unopened—there's a limit, after all, to the amount of perfume one woman can use up) and thanked him. I could see there was no point in doing

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anything else. Alex didn't want me to cook and that was that, he didn't want me to do any of the things I'd been brought up to believe a wife should do, and the sooner I got used to the idea the better.

So that's just what I made myself do. Somehow I managed to fill my days with shopping, sightseeing, visiting art galleries and exhibitions. I went to the hairdresser three times a week, that took up a good chunk of time, and then, miracle of miracles, I found something I actually enjoyed doing, and that was swimming. I'd been quite a good swimmer as a child—before Dad died we lived near the sea and I used to spend all the summer holidays in and out of the water or messing about in boats, but since we moved to London I just hadn't bothered. But now I joined a health club, even started taking lessons. Alex seemed pleased I'd found an interest.

"If it keeps you happy, darling," he said.

But after a while even that began to pall and I started to think more and more about having a baby. That would, I thought, be the perfect solution. With a baby to occupy me my days would seem all too short, and the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it. We'd never actually talked about having children and Alex had put himself in charge of making sure we didn't have any, so I knew we'd have to discuss it and for weeks I tried to find the right moment to bring the subject up. Finally, one evening when he seemed in an especially good mood, I managed it.

"A baby?" he said. And there was something in his tone that told me this wasn't going to be easy.

My heart sank. "Well . . . Yes."

"You want a baby."

"I would like one, yes."

"So soon?"

"What do you mean, soon?"

"Well, we've only been married a year. Don't you think it's a bit early to be thinking about starting a family?"

"Well no, I don't."

"We couldn't have a child here," he said, glancing around the room.

"I know. But we never intended to stay here permanently, did we?"

"You don't like this flat?"

"Well yes, it's beautiful. But . . ."

"Well there you are then. Why change it?"

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"It's just that . . . Alex, I've tried to make you understand this before, but you just don't seem to listen. There isn't enough for me to do here."

"Do? What do you mean?"

I wasn't sure if he really didn't know what I was talking about or if he simply didn't want to, if you see what I mean, but in any case I was beginning to feel desperate. "It's so . . ." I'd been going to say, "boring," but found I just couldn't. His bottom lip was beginning to stick out in that way it did when he was hurt. "It's just that I haven't enough to occupy me."

He didn't say anything for a minute, then he shook his head. "I don't know," he said. He sounded despairing.

"What do you mean? What don't you know?"

"What I can do to make you happy. I've tried to give you everything, everything you could possibly need, and you're still saying it's not enough, aren't you? No, what you're really saying is that *I'm* not enough for you, isn't it?"

"No, Alex, of course not! It's just that . . ."

"You're getting tired of me."

"No! How could I be? As I've stated before, you're the kindest, most generous man in the world."

"You don't mean that. You can't. Otherwise you wouldn't be talking about babies when we've only been married five minutes. I didn't know you were that keen on having children anyway."

Something leapt up in my chest and for a moment I felt as though I was suffocating. Then I managed to say, "Are you saying you're not?"

"Not that keen, no. I can't say I've given it much thought. The way I look at it is, why bother to change things when you're happy as you are?"

"You mean you never want to . . ."

"Darling," he said, and he cupped his hands around my face and gave me a long, loving look, "we're young, and we'll only be young once. Why can't we enjoy it, enjoy each other? There'll be plenty of time, later on, to think of giving up our freedom."

"But I don't think about it like that, Alex. To me it wouldn't be giving up my freedom. I've always wanted children—two, at least, perhaps three. . . ."

He jumped up, but not before I'd caught the look of horror on his face. "I forgot," he said. "Look what I picked up on the way home tonight." And he took from his briefcase a handful of brightly coloured holiday brochures and showered them into my

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lap. "Where would you like to go this year?" he said. "Anywhere you like, just name it."

And that was the moment when I knew there wasn't going to be a baby, not then, not ever, that this was another fact I was going to have to get used to. I looked at my husband's face, smiling in anticipation of my pleasure, and I told myself again how stupid I was, how ungrateful. How many women had a husband like this, I asked myself, anxious to gratify their every whim? I smiled back and his face lit up.

"Where did you have in mind?" I said.

But Alex insisted I choose, and in the end we went to Scotland. I think he was a bit disappointed really, he wanted to whisk me off to somewhere really glamorous, but I'd had enough of civilisation for a while, I wanted to go somewhere a bit more rugged, untamed, if you know what I mean. In fact, I was all for renting a croft somewhere really out in the wilds and having a walking, fishing, and boating holiday, but Alex wasn't prepared to put up with that. Scotland, yes, if we must, he said, but we'd see it from the luxury of a comfortable billet. And I had to admit, when we got there, that the hotel he'd chosen was very, well, civilised. And it was in a really lovely setting, on the shores of a big loch.

"Happy?" he said, as we strolled down to the water's edge that first evening.

The next day we toured around by car. I could tell that Alex was a bit put out that there weren't many big towns around, not many tourist attractions to visit, but give him his due, he put a good face on it and pretended to be enjoying himself, and as for me, well, I fell in love with the countryside in a big way. It was funny, I'd never felt like that before about anywhere else we'd been, and I've certainly never thought of myself as a country girl. But this was so wild, so free. . . . I longed to be out in it, to feel those big empty spaces all around me, and the next afternoon I coaxed Alex into a really long walk. I'd come well prepared, bought myself a barbour and some proper walking shoes—and broken them in, too—and I'd tried to persuade Alex to do the same, but he wasn't having any. I think he thought that when it actually came down to it I wouldn't be too keen on all that outdoor stuff, but he was happy to indulge me, as usual, even if he wasn't prepared to go along with it a hundred percent himself.

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So when we set off there I was in my new gear and Alex in suede jacket and Hush Puppies. I was on top of the world, I can tell you, and what with all that swimming I was pretty fit, too, so I was up and down those hills like a young lamb scenting freedom for the first time. It wasn't long before I realised Alex was finding it pretty hard going—well, I mean to say, the only exercise he ever took was to and from the tube and car. But he never said a word, just puffed along beside me, determined to enjoy it for my sake, and I told myself again how lucky I was to have a man like that, a man in a million, like Mum had said.

The weather forecast hadn't been too good but it was fine enough when we set off and I was so keen to get out that I persuaded Alex to ignore it. "The worst that can happen is we'll get wet," I said, "and that won't matter. We've got loads of dry clothes and the hotel is so comfortable, there'll be plenty of water for nice hot baths if we need them. Oh, come on, Alex, it'll be fun."

After all the warnings we'd read about mists coming down unexpectedly and people getting lost in the hills, we'd decided the sensible thing to do was walk right around the loch—then we couldn't possibly lose our way. Although there wasn't a path as such, a lot of it was pretty level going, but here and there the hills rose straight up out of the water and after about an hour and a half Alex developed blisters, first on one heel, then on the other. By this time we were just about halfway around.

"God knows what sort of state my feet'll be in by the time we get back!" he said. He was sitting on a big rock and had taken his socks off to inspect the damage.

I could have said, well, if you'd gotten proper boots as I suggested you wouldn't be in this position now, but I didn't. I just said, "Why don't you wait here and I'll go back to the hotel and fetch some plasters?"

"Good grief, no!" he said, all shocked. "I'm not letting you go off by yourself in a place like this!"

"Why not?" I said. "There's no danger about, we haven't seen a soul all afternoon. And you'll be able to see me most of the way, from here. Look, there's the hotel." It was almost opposite us on the other side of the loch and Alex gave it a longing glance before saying, "And a fine idiot I'd look, wouldn't I, sending my wife back to fetch plasters for my blisters. No"—and already he was putting his socks back on—"I'll manage somehow."

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And manage he did, for the next half-hour. But our progress got slower and slower, and soon he was hobbling rather than walking, and I was getting worried about the way the light seemed to be going much earlier than I'd expected and the sky was getting a sort of murky grey.

That was when Alex spotted the rowing boat pulled up on the shore. "Look!" he said, his face lighting up like Moses when he saw the promised land. "There's our answer!" And he was off, blisters forgotten.

By the time I caught up with him he was already getting in.

I looked at the boat and I didn't like what I saw. The timbers were cracked, and if it hadn't been for the oars I would have suspected it had long been abandoned. "It doesn't look very safe to me."

"Nonsense! It's obviously in regular use. I'm sure whoever owns it won't mind us borrowing it. We'll pay him well, of course."

"That's not the point. I don't think . . ."

"Darling, stop fussing and hop in, will you! We'll be across in no time."

"I don't know," I said. "It's probably farther than you think. And the weather doesn't look too good. There's a mist starting to come down."

"All the more reason to hurry." He was struggling to fit the oars into the rowlocks and I could see he'd probably never set foot in a boat before. Suddenly I remembered how I'd always enjoyed rowing myself, the terrific sense of power it gives you, the magic moment when you really find your rhythm and the boat begins to skim across the water. I scrambled in and said, "Look, let me do that."

He didn't even glance up. "You? Don't be silly, darling. Rowing is a man's job. You'd get blisters all over your hands."

"But I used to . . ."

"Look, just get in and sit down, will you, Rosebud? I'll get the hang of it in no time, I'm sure."

"But I . . ."

"Can't you see this is difficult enough already, without you trying to distract me?" he snapped.

It was the only time he had ever spoken sharply to me and the shock made me shut up straightaway and sit down. But I must admit I was practically twitching with frustration by the

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myself. Alex was only trying to look after me as he always did, I told myself, and he'd never let me down yet. I could quite see that he'd feel he had if he gave in and let me take over. And after all, the loch wasn't that big. Even if he had to stop rowing and we drifted, we'd eventually reach the shore. And we were both fit and healthy and warmly dressed, a night in the open wouldn't kill us.

But all the while I'd been concentrating on trying to make myself believe everything was going to be all right, my hands had gone on betraying my true feelings behind my back. There was something sticking out of the transom, right down at the bottom, and my fingers latched onto it as if it were a lifeline, scrabbling and tugging at it as if they had nothing to do with what I was telling myself.

Suddenly I felt water gush over my fingers and a moment later Alex said, "There's water in the bottom of the boat."

I knew at once what had happened and I slid off my seat and began a frantic search.

"Ros, you're rocking the boat. What are you doing?"

"Looking for the bung. I think it's come out."

"Oh God! Ros, I can't swim!"

How could I have forgotten?

I don't remember much about the next half-hour, just a nightmare of rising water, cries for help, and frantic attempts to bail out with our shoes. When it was obvious we were losing the battle I said, "Alex, if the boat does sink, make sure you let me support you, to tow you in to the shore. There's no need to worry, I can do it easily. I've had plenty of life-saving practice, got all my badges." I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt. It would be a long swim and I knew how nonswimmers tended to panic when they found themselves in the water, especially when, like Alex, they were used to being the one in charge. "But whatever happens, *don't struggle*, or we'll both go down, do you hear me?"

I kept on saying this, over and over again, but as I feared, by the time we finally sank, Alex had gotten himself into such a state that he almost strangled me, clutching me around the neck.

There's no doubt about it, I'll never find another husband like him, not in a thousand years. But as I said to Mum later, there was no point in both of us going under, was there? ●

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time he finally managed to pull away from the shore. We set off in a series of zigzags and we'd only gone a couple of hundred yards when suddenly the mist came down with a vengeance and it was just as if a white blanket had been thrown over us. One minute it was reasonably clear, and the next we could hardly see each other.

That was when I began to get really worried. If Alex had been a good oarsman and I was confident he could row in a reasonably straight line, I wouldn't have been too concerned. All he'd have to do was keep going and we'd hit the opposite shore. But I'd seen enough people learning to row to know that without any reference point to aim at we could easily end up going round and round in circles. I decided I'd have to try again.

"Alex."

"What?"

Definitely on a short fuse, no doubt about that.

"Remember I told you that before Dad died we used to live at the seaside?"

A grunt.

"He taught me to row. I was quite good at it."

"And I'm not. Is that what you're saying?"

"No! Well . . . Yes. But only because you've never had any practice! I'm sure you'd be brilliant at it if you had."

"If you're suggesting we change places, forget it. I'd be the laughingstock of the place if we turned up with you rowing me."

"But what would that matter, as long as we got there safely?"

"And you don't think we will if I row, is that it? You just don't trust me, that's what it comes down to, doesn't it?"

"No! It's just that . . . It seems so . . . Look, if you'd only let me try. We could change places and then change back again, just before we got there. Then no one would know."

"*I* would!" he said. And I could tell by his tone that nothing was going to make him change his mind.

"And for God's sake stop wringing your hands like that!" he said. "It's driving me crazy."

It was true. I hadn't realised, but my hands seemed to have taken on a life of their own, twisting and turning and plucking at each other. I suppose I'd been trying so hard to appear relaxed and unworried that the turmoil inside me had to come out somehow. Because I was in a turmoil, no doubt about that. I put my hands behind me, took some deep breaths, and tried to calm

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MINUTE MYSTERY

BOMB SCARE

by Bill Pronzini

He was a hypertensive little man with overlarge ears and buck teeth—Brer Rabbit dressed up in a threadbare brown suit and sunglasses. In his left hand he carried a briefcase with a broken catch; it was held closed by a frayed strap that looked as if it might pop loose at any second. And inside the briefcase—

"A bomb," he kept announcing in a shrill voice. "I've got a remote-controlled bomb in here. Do what I tell you, don't come near me, or I'll blow us all up."

Nobody in the branch office of the San Francisco Trust Bank was anywhere near him. Lawrence Metaxa, the manager, and the other bank employees were frozen behind the row of tellers' cages. The four customers, me included, stood in a cluster out front. None of us was doing anything except waiting tensely for the little rabbit to quit hopping around and get down to business.

It took him another few seconds. Then, with his free hand, he dragged a cloth sack from his coat and threw it at one of the tellers. "Put the money in there. Stay away from the silent alarm or I'll set off the bomb, I mean it."

Metaxa assured him in a shaky voice that they would do whatever he asked.

"Hurry up, then." The rabbit waved his empty right hand in the air, jerkily, as if he were directing some sort of mad symphony. "Hurry up, hurry!"

The tellers got busy. While they hurriedly emptied cash drawers, the little man produced a second cloth sack and moved in my direction. The other customers shrank back. I stayed where I was, so he pitched the sack to me.

"Put your wallet in there," he said in a voice like glass cracking. "All your valuables. Then get everybody else's."

I said, "I don't think so."

"What? What?" He hopped on one foot, then the other, making the briefcase dance. "What's the matter with you? Do what I told you!"

When he'd first come in and started yelling about his bomb, I'd thought that I couldn't have

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picked a worse time to take care of my bank deposits. Now I was thinking that I couldn't have picked a better time. I took a measured step toward him. Somebody behind me gasped. I took another step.

"Stay back!" the little guy shouted. "I'll push the button, I'll blow us up—"

I said, "No, you won't," and rushed him and yanked the briefcase out of his hand.

More gasps, a cry, the sounds of customers and employees scrambling for cover. But nothing happened, except that the little guy tried to run away. I caught him by the collar and dragged him back. His struggles were brief and half-hearted; he'd gambled and lost. He knew when he was licked.

Scared faces peered over counters and around corners. I held the briefcase up so they could all see it. "No bomb here, folks. You can relax, it's all over."

It took a couple of minutes to restore order, during which time I marched the little man around to Metaxa's desk and pushed him into a chair. He sat slumped, twitching and muttering. "Lost my job, so many debts . . . must've been crazy to do a thing like this . . . I'm sorry . . ." Poor little rabbit. He wasn't half as sorry now as he was going to be later.

I opened the case while Metaxa called the police. The only thing inside was a city telephone directory for weight.

When Metaxa hung up he said, "You took a crazy risk, grabbing the briefcase like that. If he'd really had a bomb in there . . ."

"I knew he didn't."

"*Knew* he didn't? How?"

"I'm a detective, remember? Three reasons. One: Bombs are delicate mechanisms; people who build them are cautious by necessity. They don't put explosives in a cheap case with a busted catch and just a frayed strap holding it together, not unless they're suicidal. Two: He claimed it was remote-controlled. But the hand he kept waving was empty and all he had in the other one was the case. Where was the remote? In one of his pockets, where he couldn't get at it easily? No. A real bomber would've had it out in plain sight to back up his threat."

"Still, you *could've* been wrong on both counts. Neither is an absolute certainty."

"No, but the third reason is as close to one as you can get. It takes more than just skill to make a bomb. It takes nerve, coolness, patience, and a very steady hand. Look at our friend here. He doesn't have any of those attributes; he's the chronically nervous type, as jumpy as six cats. He could no more manufacture an explosive device than you or I could fly. If he'd ever tried, he'd have blown himself up in two minutes flat."

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A Woolf in Vita's Clothing

by Andrew Coburn

Ten years ago a man named Benson married her and took her to North Dakota, where gigantic skies diminished her, winds haunted her, and winters oppressed her. Her only means of escape was a Greyhound bus. People in the town called it "riding the dog." She rode the dog to Chicago, arriving with forty-four dollars in her bag, which was a weight because much of it was in coin.

In a coffee shop she chose to sit beside a man who appealed to her in a comforting way. He had the sort of face, not entirely unattractive, that looked as if it wanted to be forgiven, the sin left to the imagination. At other moments, however, when he gazed at her over his coffee mug, she sensed something unexplained and inaccurate in his face.

Eating a blueberry muffin, the first food she'd had since boarding the bus, she said that the greatest loneliness in the world resides in North Dakota, the loneliness limitless in winter and hellish in summer. The roads, she said, were made for high speeds and suicides, the suicides usually called accidents.

For the past several months *EQMM* has been publishing stories by runners-up in the Mystery Writers of America's Fiftieth Anniversary Short Story Contest. "A Woolf in Vita's Clothing" is one of the contest's seven runners-up, but it is a story quite unlike the others in that it is occupied primarily with the inner lives of its characters. Andrew Coburn lives in Andover, Massachusetts. His most recent novel is *Voices in the Dark* (Onyx Press, 1995). †

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"I've never been to North Dakota," he said.

She told him that her husband owned a stereo, which he tuned to farm reports in the morning and country music at night. Their only child, a son, she said, died before his second birthday. From her weighted bag she produced a color snapshot of the child.

Glancing at it politely, the man said offhandedly, "So, you've left your husband."

She returned the picture to her bag.

"You're a good-looking woman," he said, staring intently at her. "He might come looking for you."

"No. He won't do that."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure," she said.

Later he took her to a hotel, where she soaked in a hot bath and then wrapped herself in a voluminous towel. He was sitting low in a chair and watching television news. Suddenly he gripped the arms of the chair and sat erect. "Jesus," he said. "That's you!"

She peered carefully and critically at the screen. "I wish they hadn't used that picture."

He was looking at her in a whole new way. The color in his face had risen. "Why did you do it?"

"Do you need to ask?"

He thought for a moment. "No, I guess not."

"Are you going to turn me in?"

He used the remote to kill the television. "I suppose I should, but I won't."

She let out a breath. "I don't know your name."

"Chuck," he said.

She held out a hand. "I'm Caroline."

During the night he woke with a start, raised himself on an elbow, and peered down at her in the light from the bathroom. In sleep she looked imaginary, a product of whatever dream she was dreaming.

In the morning he ordered breakfast for them through room service. She stayed in the bathroom until it was delivered. Over coffee he said, "You should dye your hair."

Her hair was very blond. "No, I like it as it is."

"Then tie it in a knot or something."

"Yes, I can do that."

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"You can't stay in Chicago."

"I don't know where else to go."

The morning paper had come with their breakfast. He refrained from looking at it. "We'll think of something," he said, rising. His suitcase was of dark leather and fully packed. Hers was of cracked plastic and contained changes of underwear and little else. "We'll have to get you some different clothes," he said.

"Are you rich?"

"I have credit cards."

Her bag was on the dresser. He felt the weight of it when he moved it and wondered whether the weight was a gun. Opening it, he saw a load of coins. He took out a handful for the maid.

She kept pace with the fast sidewalk crowd. Newly outfitted in navy and white—a jacket with outsize lapels and pockets, a blouse full of frills, and a skirt billowing from the hips—she came across as the sails and rigging of a slender ship braving rough waters. The eyes of a derelict went small looking at her.

She waited at a corner, where the air of traffic stood stiff. The springtime sky had a summery touch. A crowd waiting to cross compacted around her and then, when the lights changed, hurried on without her. Presently Chuck arrived in a gray rental and flung open the passenger door.

"Get in."

Several blocks later they got snarled in a gridlock at an intersection. It was almost as if a malignant force were binding them in. She looked out her window at a man maneuvering a shopping carriage brimming with redeemable cans. She gazed past him to a window of dinette furniture.

"I was born in this city," she said.

"Do you have family here?"

"Nobody. My mother and father are dead."

"I like your outfit."

"It's not me," she said.

They did not speak again until they were free of the gridlock and nearing an artery that would take them out of the city. She said, "Where are we going?"

He said, "We'll know when we get there."

Road-weary, they checked into a motel off a highway in Indiana. Again she had a long hot soak in the tub, as if to steam away

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not only North Dakota but Chicago. When she emerged in one of his shirts, he was watching television, which did not surprise her.

"Was I on again?"

"Only for an instant," he said, viewing her with sober eyes. "You should've bought some jeans. We'll get you some in the next town."

"I'm running up a bill."

"I don't keep chits."

She stepped behind his chair and gazed down into his hair, which held a few threads of gray at the part. "Chuck," she said in a near whisper.

For a moment he did not respond. Then he did, quietly. "What?"

"You haven't told me anything about yourself."

When he closed his eyes and remained silent, she moved to the television and scrutinized the pay offerings. "They have dirty movies," she said. "I've never seen one."

"Do you want to?"

"No," she said.

In bed, the light in the bathroom left on, he made love to her with her consent but without her full attention. She would have rather turned over and gone to sleep. When he finished, she was wide awake. Lying on her side, facing him, she began talking about her husband, how she had managed it. He was sleeping, she said. When she cut his throat, she saw a quart of blood.

"I don't want to hear," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He lay still. "My wife is dead."

"Like my husband?"

"No, it was different."

She waited for him to go on, but he did not. Soon he was asleep, and eventually she drifted off. In a dream her husband's corpse came to life and went crazy over the condition it was in.

They stopped in a small town in Ohio for lunch. She had on a white blouse and jeans, and she wore her hair in a severe bun, which gave her face a broader definition. They lingered at the restaurant to the point that the other tables began to stand empty. Without prompting, he told her he had taught literature at Dartmouth College, where he had met his wife, a graduate

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student of uncommon abilities and diverse opinions.

"I knew you were educated," she said.

He sipped his coffee. "We were married twenty years."

"Did you love her?"

"Very much, but it's not clear whether she ever loved me."

"Did you have children?"

"Two boys, grown now. They hate me."

"Do they have reason?"

"They think so," he said and fell into one of his silences, which threatened the air between them.

"Please," she said, "tell me what's going on in your mind?"

"You don't want to know."

"But I do."

"A drama," he said, his tone turning light. "Vita Sackville-West, handsome in men's clothing, is having tea with Virginia Woolf. Virginia places a hand on Vita's trousered knee and says, 'I wish I had your balls.' "

"Are they real people?"

"They were real once. They're mythology now."

"I'm not sure what you're telling me."

"My wife left me for another woman."

The waitress dropped off the check. She wanted to pay it, but he took it from her and laid out a gilt credit card. She said, "Did you kill your wife?"

He smiled thinly through the dark of his face. "There were two trials, mistrials, deadlocked juries. They finally let me go."

"Tell me about your sons."

"I already have. They hate the ground I walk on. They testified against me. They raged at the district attorney when I was freed." Without warning one of his hands began to tremble. Instinctively she reached over to steady it, but he drew back. "It'll pass," he said.

The waitress processed the credit card and returned it. He scratched his name illegibly on the receipt and managed a smile. Moments later, from across the room, the waitress gave them a hard stare.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

Springtime sleet fell in upstate New York. Chuck squinted through the windshield, for the wipers were smearing what they plowed. On the interstate, after paying the toll with quarters

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from her bag, he drove at a moderate speed, and she counted the mileposts along the way.

"Why are you doing this for me?" she asked. "You probably could get any woman. You don't need me."

"We need each other," he said. "I saw that right away."

Within the hour the sky cleared and the sun came out. The defroster had made the air in the car humid. Her white shirt felt clammy against her skin. She felt she had gone bad in it.

Chuck said, "How did you meet your husband?"

"He came to Chicago. He wore a tan suit. It was summer, and I was clerking in a convenience store."

"Why did you marry him?"

"He put his hand over his heart and said he loved me."

They passed a disabled car squatting in the breakdown lane. The sun, wheeling in and out of clouds, showed itself in momentary shocks, as if someone were shooting at them. She lowered the visor.

"When things went wrong at the farm he blamed me. Some things were my fault, but I did my best. He said my head was in the clouds."

Chuck's eye was in the rearview. "Reality craves fantasy."

"When the baby took sick he wouldn't call the doctor. He didn't believe in doctors, only in God. He was a churchgoer. I'm sure all the people at the church hate me now."

"Yes, you can bet on it," he said abstractedly.

"Is something wrong?"

"There's a police car behind us."

"I'm not scared." She raised the visor. "Why aren't I, Chuck?"

"You haven't come down yet. In time you will, and then you'll be scared of yourself."

"How do you know?"

"I know," he said.

Watching starlings descend like a rockslide onto the grassy center strip, she thought of people at the church. The only one she would miss was eccentric Mrs. Hager, who wore wide-brimmed hats and smoked while she prayed.

Chuck's voice loosened. "It's gone," he said.

Turning, she glimpsed the state police cruiser veering around the curve of an exit ramp.

* * *

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They checked into a motor inn in the Berkshires. He had bought her a nightgown with lace. Humid from her bath, her backside was a rosy glow inside the gown. She pulled at the elastic on his boxer shorts and let it snap against his skin.

"That hurt," he said.

She apologized in a soft voice. "That wasn't my intention."

From the bed they watched one of those movies, her idea. She thought it might be fun. A nun lifted her skirts and revealed long, splendid legs. Then a man came into the picture. The mole on his back looked like a penny.

Chuck spoke in her ear. "Turn it off if it offends you."

"No," she said. "It's what people do."

He said, "There's nothing people won't do."

After the movie was over he propped himself up on an elbow and seemed to find something wondrously pristine about her body, as if no hand other than her own had ever touched it. He bared her breasts appreciatively, as if removing gift apples from their tissue wrappings. Some women are unforgettable in their nakedness. He told her she was one of them.

After they made love they lay locked in the dying intensities, with neither wanting to let go. He stroked her hair. "I hope I'm wrong," he said, "but this may be our last night together."

She breathed up at him. "Why do you say that?"

"I've been foolish about money. It's added up to quite a bit. They're after me too."

She embraced him harder. "We've become close."

He said, "I love you, Caroline."

"Are we still in Massachusetts?" she asked.

"New Hampshire," he said.

Here in New England the sky seemed closer, the clouds pushed low, not at all like North Dakota where the heavens are gigantic, the clouds massive and aloof, and the emptiness awesome. She remembered storms so horrendous they threatened to crack the planet.

"Are you scared yet?" he asked.

"No," she said.

He was driving on back roads and finding excuses to stop in each small town they came to. The strong scent of potpourri issued from a gift shop. He went into it and bought her a silver bracelet, a perfect fit for her slim wrist. At a small shopping

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center he picked out a stylish trenchcoat with slash pockets and a wide belt. She looked quite nice in it.

"Why do you keep putting me in different clothes? Are you trying to make me someone else?"

"You are someone else," he said.

"I feel like I'm in the movies."

Back on the road, she stretched her legs out as much as she could and dozed off. In a dream a fully uniformed police officer, the brightness of his brass vying with the shine of his leather, tapped her solidly on the shoulder and said, *Are you Caroline Benson?* Pointing at Chuck, she said, *You'll have to ask him.*

At nightfall he reached the end of the line, a town where landmarks evoked memories and raised ghosts. The Texaco station was a beacon. Blue neon burned over the doorway of Bill's Cafe, a hangout for rural riffraff. He could see into the drugstore, which was stuck in time. It had a marble soda fountain and round revolving seats. The soda jerk was in his nineties.

He drove through the center and past the lights of the library, where forsythia was in gushing bloom. Caroline sat with her head back and her eyes closed, but he knew she was not asleep. As he neared the far edge of town, the roadside went wooded. Headlights of an approaching car were pale strains adhering to nothing, and the car, which may have been a van, floated by without sound or shape, driverless for all he knew.

Warm air from the day clashed with the cold of evening, and swirls of mist ran yellow in the moonlight and hovered ghostly wherever the road dipped. He drove with a fear he might hit something, for the road was rerouting itself the way a river sometimes abandons its bed to make another. Then the road straightened, and he knew exactly where he was.

Caroline said, "Why are we stopping?"

"You grew up in Chicago," he said, "I grew up here."

He stepped from the car, waited while she buttoned her trenchcoat, and then gave her his arm. The moon irradiated a path that took them through the pinewood and the ring of peepers. A pond opened in front of them.

"I used to take my boys fishing here. We never caught anything but perch."

"I've never seen a perch," she said.

"They're not very big."

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They stood at the edge of the pond, mist scaling off the surface, the moon mirrored on it. The moon fascinated him. It was a dead thing that looked alive on the water. It was gloom wearing bridal white. He said, "We grow, we reach a height, we contract, we die. Ever ask yourself why, Caroline?"

"Yes," she said. "When my mother died."

"Beautiful stars up there," he said, raising his eyes. "What we see as up could be down."

"How can we tell?"

"We can't. Think of God as a mathematical genius and a perverse toymaker. Who else would have put worlds spinning on their axes? Leaves us not knowing which end is up."

"But He must have done it for a purpose."

"Pure amusement, Caroline."

"You're fooling me," she said. "Tell me what you really believe."

"At some point the universe will dissolve into an idea of itself, from which it evolved. Put another way, when God grows bored with his idea of us, we're finished."

She tightened her grip on his arm. "That can't be true."

"Truth is relative. A lie told in Chicago is gospel in North Dakota."

"You know so much."

He wanted to tell her that he knew nothing. He was a product of group therapy, disturbed strangers bathing in a communal pool of unhappiness polluted by self-pity, their troubles traced to others, not themselves, responsibility seldom mentioned.

Passing geese skimmed their shadows over the water and eclipsed the mirrored moon. Dark air currents carried the scent of pine. "I'm getting scared," Caroline said. The moisture of night sheathed her face the way it did apples in an orchard. "What's going to happen to me, Chuck?"

"We devise our own punishment. A woman I mentioned, Mrs. Woolf, waded into a pond like this one and never came out."

"I wouldn't want to do that."

"Nor would I," he said, and led her from the water's edge.

In a country inn a mile from the pond, she shrugged off the trenchcoat and said, "You were wrong. We have another night together."

"We got lucky," he said.

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The room was unlike the others they had shared and gave her an uneasy sense of being back at the farm. The furniture could have been acquired from an old funeral home. A high-back chair stood somber and still, the arms rubbed smooth as if by grieving hands. A settee issued a prayerful air of rectitude. Decorous end tables and a drop-leaf desk stood stolid. The only thing missing was a sampler on the wall.

"It's like you've brought me back," she said.

"I've brought us both back."

"Why?"

"We can face anything together."

In her mind the room was not here but where it should be. The sampler appeared on the wall. Fascination held her eyes open. A blink would have exploded the image.

"Yes," she said when he kissed her.

He undressed her and told her she was lovely everywhere. On the bed he kissed the soles of her feet. No man had ever done that to her before.

"Yes," she whispered. "I love you too."

They rose late and checked out after a slow breakfast. The air was warm, but the sky threatened. When they climbed into the car they saw sprinkles on the windshield. He did not drive far, only a few miles beyond the inn. Pulling over, a grove of birch and maple in sight, he let the car slow to a standstill.

A fine rain netted trees and veiled shrubs. The grass steamed and wet her shoes. Violets lay cool in their foliage. She hiked up the collar of her trenchcoat and took his arm. He had on a nylon jacket and sturdier shoes.

"I used to bring the family here," he said. "Picnics."

In the grove they passed tables and benches. She could hear the light rain in the trees, the sound like metal points pricking the leaves, which were tender, not yet at full strength. There were trees in North Dakota, but she could not remember any of them.

Leaving the grove, they climbed over a low crumbling wall of unmortared stones and stepped into a meadow. A single leafless magnolia in full bloom gave her a sense of being a bride again. Beyond the meadow was a grassy hill, over which they saw a small slash of lightning. "This isn't the best place to be," he said.

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"I don't mind, if you don't." She reached for his sleeve. "Do you believe in God, Chuck?"

"I don't believe anything can come from nothing, so there must've always been something. That's as far as my mind will take me."

"I believe there has to be something other."

"That's a whole new ballgame," he said and gazed toward the hill. "Will you climb it with me?"

The gray sky darkened as they crossed the meadow. The rain weighted their hair but not their steps. When she glanced at him, her smile resembled his, giving them a fleeting physical likeness. Seen from a distance, they looked cut from the same hide.

At a roll of thunder he glanced back as if something had been lost. She gazed ahead as if much were to be gained. On his mind were things no longer worth telling, on hers matters too complex to mention. He heard another roll of thunder and imagined it chasing him. She believed it was leading her. Climbing the hill, he believed nothing more was at stake, and she believed everything was. He expected to die and be nowhere. She anticipated an elsewhere.

At the top of the hill they held hands and let go at the vital moment. Surging from the sky like a white shark, the bolt of lightning struck her and missed him.

She had won. He had lost.

Driving back through the town, he considered seeing his sons, but didn't want to shock them.

Later, the sun brilliant, an elderly couple with birding binoculars found her where she had fallen, her trenchcoat scorched black. Her bag, split open, was a spill of coins. ●

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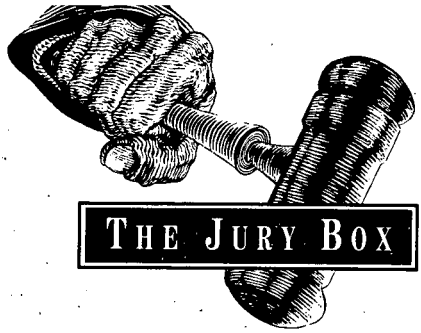

by Jon L. Breen

The book-length poem is a crime-fiction rarity. The only examples that come readily to mind are Martha Grimes's parodic *Send Bygraves* (1989) and Joseph Auslander's *Hell in Harness* (1929), a gangster saga identified as an "alternative classic" and quoted at length in Bill Pronzini's *Son of Gun in Cheek* (1987). The prospect of a lesbian private eye novel in verse will probably delight a few readers and turn off a lot more. Even those in the latter group might want to consider this month's lead item.

*** Dorothy Porter: *The Monkey's Mask: An Erotic Murder Mystery,* Arcade, $19.95. Sydney sleuth Jill Fitzpatrick takes on a typical missing-daughter job and confronts a *noir*ish tangle of love and murder. One challenge facing a poet is to say more in fewer words. Porter manages to tell a book-length mystery in a work whose pages, though numbering some 260, are sometimes blank and include much white space. More significantly, she achieves clarity (a glossary of terms helps the non-Australian reader), reader involvement, and a mastery of language that advances both the story and the mood.

*** Grif Stockley: *Illegal Motion,* Simon and Schuster, $21. Though the novels about Arkansas lawyer Gideon Page qualify as mysteries, they are more concerned with legal, social, moral, and personal dilemmas than detection. In his fourth appearance, Page takes on the defense of a University of Arkansas football player accused of rape. As before, central to the action are widower Page's romantic involvements and his relationship with

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daughter Sarah, who had a born-again religious experience in *Religious Conviction* (1994) and this time comes under the influence of militant feminists. The decent Page presents himself warts and all: He has not completely shed his racial prejudices and one reason he takes the case is that he hopes to be employed to negotiate his client's pro football contract. Stockley's books aren't for every taste, but I for one would be hard pressed to leave one unread.

*** Carolyn Wheat: *Fresh Kills,* Berkley, $19.95 hardcover; $9 trade paperback. In her third appearance, and first since *Where Nobody Dies* (1986), New York attorney Cass Jameson is called in by a former law-school classmate to represent the birth mother in an arranged adoption. A complicated web of double cross and murder follows. As in her previous novels, Wheat both entertains and informs, laying on the suspense and plot twists while exploring the difficult social and legal issues of the rights of natural and adoptive parents. My only complaint about the Cass Jameson novels is that they turn up too infrequently.

*** Harold Adams: *The Ditched Blonde,* Walker, $19.95. The latest about Carl Wilcox, itinerant sign-painter and sometime private-eye in Depression-era South Dakota, is another brief, solidly-plotted, and well-written whodunit, reopening the case of a pregnant teenager who was the victim of vehicular murder four years earlier. (In reviewing Adams's last novel, I noted a tendency to anacronistic slang. Challenged by a reader, I looked carefully for examples this time around and found none—Adams is true to his period with a minimum of specific references, though there is one to Greta Garbo.)

*** Robert Campbell: *Sauce for the Goose,* Mysterious, $18.95. In the latest in another series notable for a distinctive first-person voice, Chicago politico Jimmy Flannery goes to night school to improve his ungrammatical English (an effort the reader is relieved to see waning as the book goes on) and becomes involved in the problems, criminous and otherwise, of his professors and classmates. The author's character-drawing and storytelling are as sure as ever. (Note for collectors: Though Campbell is unmistakably an American writer, due to the vagaries of publishing schedules, the British edition, published in 1994 by Hodder and Stoughton, is the true first.)

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*** Carolyn G. Hart: *Mint Julep Murder,* Bantam, $19.95. Five Southern authors, guests of honor at a Hilton Head book festival, learn they are to be featured in an attending publisher's tell-all *roman à clef.* Murder, of course, results, investigated by author liaison and mystery book dealer Annie Laurance Darling and husband Max. Aside from the usual incessant mystery references, the setting gives Hart a chance to drop the names of numerous Southern writers outside the genre. Fans of the series will enjoy this one, but an instance late in the going underlines how far the Darling books are removed from reality: In the throes of pondering the murder problem, Annie turns for inspiration not to real-life detectives, not even to fictional detectives, but to three "world-class mystery reader[s]": Janet Rudolph, Marvin Lachman, and this reviewer.

** Marshall Jevons: *A Deadly Indifference,* Carroll & Graf, $18.95. Henry Spearman, economics professor and amateur sleuth, has something in common with both Cass Jameson (long waits between cases) and the Darlings (involvement in unabashedly artificial puzzle novels). In his third case, set in 1965, he travels to Cambridge University to advise a Chicago foundation on the purchase of a famous economist's house. The prose and characterization are undistinguished, the construction sometimes ragged, but the Jevons team (professors Kenneth G. Elzinga and William Breit) play fair, and their explanations of economic theory are both fascinating and comprehensible to a reader whose most formal economic education has been regular viewing of *Wall Street Week.*

** William Relling, Jr.: *Deadly Vintage,* Walker, $19.95. The first of a projected series about Jack Donne, Treasury agent turned California vintner, centers on the unusual crime of wine counterfeiting. On the plus side, some of the characters are effectively drawn and Relling's murder methods are creatively unpleasant. On the minus side, there is considerable padding with irrelevant detail and repetitiousness, and a by-the-numbers feel to the development. Donne, not notably sharp for an ex-Fed, makes one particularly dumb move near the end. (Challenge for trivia buffs and list-makers: How many current sleuths are, like Donne, former star athletes—and how many of those suffered injuries that prematurely ended their careers?)

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Art by Greg Voth

THE DIRECTOR'S NOTES

by W. Edward Blain

Whenever the Board of Trustees was on campus, something went terribly wrong for Driscoll Henley. This rainy May morning, for instance, he couldn't find the atlas he had borrowed illegally from the school library. He had not stolen the atlas. It was important to be clear on that point. Len Lester, the school librarian, would accuse him of stealing it, but the accusation would be unfair. He had borrowed it without checking it out. The fact that you couldn't check out reference books, including this very atlas, only made the incident more complicated. And it would have been easy to replace the book unnoticed if he could just remember where he'd left it. The whole point of taking the book had been to show his cast of *The Merchant of Venice* exactly where Venice was, so it seemed logical that he would have left the atlas over in his office in the Arts Building. But it hadn't been there after the show, and it wasn't in his apartment this

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morning, and it wasn't in his car, and it wasn't in his classroom. Somebody might have taken it from any of those places, since none of them was locked, but somehow Driscoll Henley could not imagine how a folio-sized hardcover atlas could become a popular item of contraband among students, teachers, or even members of the Board. He was just going to have to find it before Len Lester learned of its disappearance.

The missing atlas had rattled him to the extent that he'd grabbed the wrong sport coat to wear to breakfast this morning. Actually, he'd thought he was taking his newer blue blazer, but his eyes didn't work as well as they once had, and he'd snatched the old blazer off the hook, shrugged it on, and, umbrella in hand, was out the door to breakfast and 100 yards down the brick sidewalk before he noticed the dried gravy on the sleeve—gravy he carefully scraped off with his thumbnail. He struggled to scrape gravy and hold the umbrella steady at the same time. The gravy was left over from the last visit of the Board of Trustees, from that disaster involving the chicken marsala at the dinner table. Henley had once been faithful about taking his clothes to the dry cleaners every time he wore them, but he'd come to realize that such a practice was not only extraordinarily expensive, but absolutely unnecessary. Time, the great leveler, had the most remarkable ability to dry out smells of smoke and sweat so that they fell like dandruff to the floor, if he waited long enough between wearings. This spot simply hadn't been there long enough to disappear of its own volition.

Although he has published two very successful mystery novels, one of them an Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee (*Passion Play*, G. P. Putnam, 1990), "The Director's Notes" is W. Edward Blain's first mystery short story. The story's hero, Driscoll Henley, appears to be a character after the author's own heart, for Mr. Blain, like Driscoll, is a teacher at a Virginia prep school. Further Driscoll Henley adventures are in the works, but readers who want to read more of Mr. Blain's fiction in the meantime should look for *Love Cools* (Putnam, 1992). ✝

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Henley had been up late last night with his cast party, and because he was running very close to the deadline for breakfast, he couldn't take more time to return home to correct his mistake in attire. He prided himself on his punctuality. He was never absent from a meal or a class and never late. Well, hardly ever late. Never absent, certainly. Except for that time in January when they'd had a power failure, of course.

Where the hell had he put the atlas?

It wasn't that he was vain about his reputation for promptness. Certainly he was no more vain about meeting deadlines than he was about his appearance or his age. He'd been behaving like a forty-year-old for years, so when the actual birthday arrived, it was as easy as stepping into a character for which he'd more than adequately rehearsed. And while it wasn't precisely true that he did not care what he looked like, it was fair to say that his standards in that department had dropped considerably: i.e., he still shaved, but used an electric razor; still brushed his hair, but only once in the morning. He really didn't care about which blazer he wore around the students, but because the trustees were here for their spring meeting, he thought he might possibly avoid looking like a middle-aged version of a younger brother, doomed always to wear hand-me-downs.

And so, when he realized what he was wearing, when he could not find the missing atlas anywhere, when he remembered that he was on duty today as the Administrative Master and would have to roam the campus with that awful walkie-talkie in order to keep up with Lee-Lee at the switchboard, he conceded that this particular Friday was going to be awful. It turned worse at 7:28 A.M., two minutes before the breakfast bell, when he was only thirty steps from the doors of the dining hall, and when he met Harold Fowler and Trent Burke, who moved on a purposeful path to intercept him. Both men were out for a pre-breakfast jog, but had to sidestep the puddles formed by the drizzling rain that had fallen for the past three days.

"Driscoll," said Trent Burke, offering a hand to shake. "I really enjoyed the play last night." Burke was a member of the executive committee of the Board and one of the most reliable advocates for the performing arts at Foxborough. He was short and quite robust despite his linen-white hair, which he wore in a dry pompadour, and which matched perfectly his immaculate white leather running shoes. Last night Henley had opened his spring

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play on the main stage of the fine arts center. *The Merchant of Venice.* It had gone very nicely, he'd thought, and it had absolutely zipped along. It had scooted along like a locomotive, even with one intermission, and he was glad that he'd made the cuts to Shakespeare's text, no matter how much certain people in the community objected. He himself should be scooting along to breakfast, but it was hard to cut loose from two members of the Board.

Harold Fowler echoed Burke's enthusiasm. "Fine show, fine show," he said.

Despite the gray of the sky, the campus still looked gorgeous. White dogwoods and green grass, red bricks and white columns, triple-sashed windows and serpentine walls. Yellow daffodils. The sort of scenery to put Board members into an affectionate and therefore magnanimous mood, Henley hoped. Harold Fowler was certainly sanguine this morning. Fowler was chairman of the Board, a tall, thin, bald man whose voice always seemed two registers too high for someone so commanding in stature. Fowler wore old gray sweats supplied by the gymnasium, in contrast to Burke's fresh new running clothes and spotless white shoes.

"I'm glad you were there," said Henley. Ninety seconds to breakfast. It was rare for members of the Board to attend student productions. Someday perhaps one of them would not only attend, but comment on the extensive Director's Notes Henley always wrote for the playbill. But nobody ever read his notes. "Sometimes people slip out at intermission."

"No, no," said Trent Burke. He looked vaguely preoccupied and lifted the collar of his warm-up jacket against the drizzle. "Harold and I stayed to the end."

"You mean slept to the end, in my case," said Harold Fowler cheerfully. Harold was legendary for his narcoleptic support for the arts. He jogged in place.

Henley shifted his weight to leave, but Trent Burke stopped him.

"I'm afraid I'm going to miss my breakfast excursion with the Head," Burke said. He tried to sound casual, but he was clearly disturbed about something. "The fact is—" He paused. "I guess I can tell you this without regretting it later." He waited to see Henley's reaction and appeared to be satisfied with the blank stare he received in return. "The fact is that I can't find Alice.

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She never came back to our room after the play last night. That's never happened before."

Harold Fowler shifted in his running shoes and looked into some unfocused middle distance. He was obviously already aware of the absence of his colleague's wife. Alice was younger than Burke by twenty-six years. She was also a flirt. Rumors circulated that she was quite fond of introducing herself to the junior faculty members and the residents of the senior boys' dorm, and Henley was terrified that she'd appear this morning walking out of Baker House with the senior class president on her arm.

Henley wanted to get the story straight. "You say she's been missing since last night?"

Burke was embarrassed. "Alice has lots of . . . friends on the campus. Very often she'll come back to the guesthouse after I've gone to sleep. Last night I thought I heard her at one point in the night, moving around in the room. But she never got into bed. She must have slipped out again, unless I was just dreaming the whole thing." Henley didn't know how to react to a comment like that, so he kept quiet and allowed Burke to keep talking. Henley had learned long ago, as a teacher, that you could learn the most by keeping your mouth closed. "Actually, I never saw her after intermission at the play. She didn't stay for the second act." He paused. "It wasn't the show, Driscoll."

"She didn't say where she was going?"

"She said that she might go to the library to do some reading. She was talking with Len Lester in the lobby."

Probably not about missing reference books. Len Lester was not shy around women. "Maybe she drove into town," said Henley. The Foxborough campus was surrounded by open pasture land but was only three miles from the village.

"Our car's still here. All her things are. She can't have left the campus. If you see her, give me a call at the guesthouse, would you? After Harold and I finish jogging, I'll be there until our ten o'clock meeting."

He smiled, shook hands again, and then both men jogged off down the damp brick sidewalk toward the outdoor track. Trent Burke was a Foxborough alumnus, a small man who had compensated for his size by winning two state championships in wrestling and building a successful law practice. It must be awful for him to have to return to a place where he was known

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and appreciated for his generosity and to wonder if all those who knew him here considered him a laughingstock. Henley himself just avoided derision from his students by stepping into the dining hall as the bell rang for breakfast. He was such a stickler for promptness that they were always watching for a chance to catch him at being late.

It was Friday morning. In the real world, even in a day school, the weekend would have been imminent. But this was not reality; this was Foxborough Hall, a 145-year-old boarding school in the Virginia horse country, where classes ran Monday through Saturday, and where daily student behavior ran the gamut from catatonic to hysterical. Henley, pretending to be the scrupulously observant Administrative Master of the day, meandered circuitously to his table in the far corner of the dining hall, a nice round table that seated four girls and four boys, all of whom were already drowsily, silently present by the time he arrived. Within five minutes he had started on his usual breakfast of half a mealy grapefruit and a bowl of soggy corn flakes. Then, at an unsupervised table nearby, a group of sophomores decided to have a food fight. Squelching it before it escalated, Henley sentenced the offenders to afternoon detention, but he was furious that Lawrence Altick hadn't been at the table to supervise the students himself. Lawrence Altick had been a problem all year, as Henley had warned the Head, Suzanne McClain. Any time you hire a former student to return as a novice teacher, you're going to have predictable trouble: missed meals; late grade comments; rowdy classrooms; and even erratic attendance to classes, most frequently on Saturday mornings. Lawrence had a girlfriend in Washington, another in Richmond, another in the town of Foxborough, and even one on campus, if you counted his on-again, off-again flings with Louanne Parker at the guesthouse. And he was Henley's immediate problem because he was in drama, Henley's department.

The fat security guard, the one that liked to talk a lot, appeared. "Mr. Henley?" he said. "You the A.M. today?"

"Indeed," said Henley.

The security guard handed Henley the dreaded gray walkie-talkie. "You might want to carry this, Mr. Henley." It had been Suzanne's idea to equip the daily duty man with a portable radio. Henley had vigorously protested. The next step would be mirrored sunglasses and cans of pepper spray. Part of the charm

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of boarding school was that you couldn't find anybody half the time you were looking.

The security guard had some business. "Did you read the report from last night?"

Of course he hadn't read the security report from last night. There was never anything interesting in the security report. For a moment he had a sense of poetic justice, of the weird symmetry of apathy that pervaded the campus. Security faithfully wrote its reports for no one to read; the director of the play faithfully wrote his Director's Notes for everyone to ignore. The security guard did not wait for him to answer.

"Mr. Altick's car is still parked down on the service road. It's been there since last night."

Lawrence Altick again. "What do you mean, parked down at the service road? His car is abandoned?"

"That's it, Mr. Henley."

"Any sign of a flat tire or breakdown?"

"No sir."

"Where is Mr. Altick? What's his explanation?"

"We haven't been able to find Mr. Altick."

Terrific. One missing wife of a board member and one missing member of the faculty. A young, libidinous member of the faculty at that.

"You tried his apartment?"

"He's not home, Mr. Henley."

Of course not. He would have some secret trysting place on the campus. The students knew a thousand of them. As an ex-student, Lawrence would have a few favorite spots of his own.

The security guard had more business. "His car got kind of muddy. We found a couple of students messing around with the road construction down where he parked. I ran them off."

"Messing around?" Henley didn't like the inclusiveness of the term.

"Throwing mud and dirt on each other and everything else they could find. They were playing around in the old drainage ditch. Shoving the dirt back in, that sort of thing."

Henley didn't understand. "Why were they pushing mud into the drainage ditch? Isn't that all going to be filled in eventually anyway?"

The guard was patient with him. "It's one of those environmental things, Mr. Henley."

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Aha. Henley was, to an extent, relieved. If there was some environmental activism on campus, it would provide the probable whereabouts of both Lawrence Altick and Alice Burke. Despite all of his faults as a teacher, Lawrence was devoted to the protection of natural resources. Henley had to commend him for his consistent support of the Earth First club here on campus. And he'd found an ally in Alice Burke, who made it clear whenever she visited the school that she liked to see students involved with recycling and conservation.

Henley's first class this morning was not until 9:30. After breakfast he walked down to the site of the construction work, his collapsible umbrella tucked like a billy club under his arm. The service road was one of three entrances onto the campus and ran behind the boys' gym out to State Route 622, which led in turn to the main highway. Foxborough sat on fifteen hundred acres of land and owned a sizeable lake as well, and it was surrounded by horse farms on all sides. No one could have guessed that the congestion of Washington, D.C., was less than sixty miles away.

The service entrance to the school was less impressive than the main entrance, which had wrought-iron gates set into a serpentine brick wall. Back here on the fringe of the campus, the fence was chain-link; the gate, mere wood. Scored like a moat through the road just inside the gate was a ditch two feet wide and two feet deep between matching concrete culverts. Behind it the white wooden gate yawned open to accommodate the bulk of the silent yellow back hoe that sat guarding its recent work like a sleeping dragon. Scraps of broken concrete pipe were scattered like archaeological relics on either side of the smooth road, and a mound of reddish-brown mud stretched like a miniature mountain range across the asphalt beside the open ditch inside the campus. Sure enough, parked in the road was the red Toyota Corolla belonging to Lawrence Altick. It looked as if it had been under attack from automatic weapons firing mudballs. Muddy hand and foot prints were all over the hood and even the windshield. Someone had written in mud "EARTH FIRST" on the passenger side. It would be undrivable until the rain washed the glass clean.

The walkie-talkie he carried in his back pocket crackled with a message for him. "Security to the A.M. Problem at the Residential Entrance." The Residential gate got locked at 8:00 P.M. and

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unlocked at 8:00 A.M. It was now 8:15 A.M. Security was running a bit behind its schedule.

Henley answered self-consciously. He felt like a grown man being forced to play with his son's toys. "I'm here, Security."

"We've got a tree across the road here."

This had to be a joke. "Another blocked road? Are you telling me somebody chopped down a tree?"

"No sir. I think it just toppled over. Ground's awful soggy." Puddles were everywhere, in fact, from the rain that had fallen for most of the week. Henley tried to find pockets of clean asphalt in order to escape the mud here on the service road.

"Anybody hurt?"

"No sir. It's a big mess, though. We got wood and leaves all over the road. It must have happened in the middle of the night."

"Does Maintenance know?"

"They said they'd be over in half an hour."

"Get them over now. We can't have all the traffic using the main entrance."

"And Mr. Henley?"

There was more. Lovely. "Yes?"

"There's a UPS truck that wants to make a delivery. Can he use the main gate?"

"He'll have to, won't he?"

Rain fell in a soft mist, and a big gust of wind sent his coattail flapping, the torn lining trembling like a silken lyre for all to see, if anyone had been there to look. This damn blazer. Henley walked forward to peek inside Lawrence Altick's car, where he half hoped to find Lawrence and Alice Burke embracing on the backseat. But the car was unoccupied and locked. He examined the mess around the vehicle. Muddy footprints and mudballs littered the wet black asphalt. The smooth ridge of red dirt that ran alongside the ditch had a couple of valleys in it where someone had either shoved the dirt back into the ditch or had kicked it onto the road. It must have been a glorious mud fight.

The atrocious walkie-talkie crackled again. It was Lee-Lee at the switchboard.

"Mr. Henley?" she said. "Ned wants you over at the gym."

"What's the matter at the gym?" That would be the boys' gym. Ned Walker was the custodian there.

"He says there's a problem."

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The whole world was full of problems this morning. As if on cue, sirens erupted on the distant highway, a mile from Henley. He could hear more than one. Were they coming to get him, to take him away? All right, Henley, we know you took the atlas, we got witnesses, see, come clean and maybe we'll go easy on you . . . "I'm on my way," he said into the speaker. He resisted the opportunity to say, "Over and out," which somebody had told him was the wrong terminology anyway.

He walked back to the inhabited part of the campus, past the flower beds and the dogwoods in front of Main Building, past the columns and the bricks and the slate roofs, toward the playing fields and the squat monolith of the boys' gym. Far away on the highway he heard more sirens, but they were not drawing any closer. The light was dim under the portico of the gym, where two wooden benches were unusable because so many boys had scraped wedges of mud from their shoes onto the slats. It was even dimmer inside the basement hallway housing the office for the gym and the locker rooms. His rubber-soled bucks squished on the smooth concrete floor. The lights were out, so the only illumination came through the open doorways of the locker rooms, which admitted a gloomy diffusion of the morning gray. He started toward the gym office but stopped when a voice called him into the J.V. boys' locker room.

"In here," said Ned Walker, who was as tall as Henley, thinner, with more hair but more gray in it, and who was usually as poised as Abraham Lincoln. Today he trembled. He wore the usual green shirt with his name stenciled inside an oval over one pocket. Henley wasn't accustomed to seeing Ned so jumpy.

"Okay, Ned," said Henley. "What's the problem?"

"There's a naked lady in the shower," said Ned. His expression prohibited any of the comeback lines that Henley might have considered. "She's dead, Driscoll." He led Henley back through the dressing area, the lockers and backless benches, to the tiled, echoing shower room. Face down and sprawled on the floor was indeed a naked woman, blond and firm and quite attractive. Beads of water glistened all over. There was steam in the air.

"I heard the water running," said Ned. "She might have been scalded to death. It was all hot water, nothing cold."

Henley was already moving toward her. He didn't know much about this sort of thing. "How do you know she's dead?" he said. He crouched beside her on the wet tile floor of the shower. His

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hands hovered over her, and then took her wrist. "Hello?" he said. "Are you all right?" No response. She didn't feel cold, but he couldn't find a pulse. Was he looking in the right place? You could find a pulse in the neck, couldn't you? Sucking in his breath, he rolled her over. Yes, she was dead. She had a standard blue-striped Foxborough necktie balled up and stuck into her mouth, and her eyes were open wide, bulging.

"Do you know her?" asked Ned Walker.

"Yes," said Driscoll Henley. "Her name is Alice Burke. She's the wife of one of our trustees."

It had suddenly become a very bad day indeed. "I heard sirens outside, Ned. Did you call the sheriff already?"

Ned shook his head to say no. "I didn't know what to do," he said.

Henley pulled out his walkie-talkie and called Security. Instead he got Lee-Lee, the switchboard operator.

"Security went down to look at the wreck," she said. There was only one security guard on duty during the day.

"What wreck?"

"There's some kind of accident out on the highway. He'll be back in a minute."

"Unless he gets recruited to help," said Henley. The highway was out of range of his walkie-talkie. "Get the Head of School for me, please, Lee-Lee."

"Not on campus. She's gone out with some trustees to look at the Massie farm."

He'd known that and forgotten. Suzanne had told him she wouldn't be in the office until the ten o'clock meeting of the Board. "Then call the sheriff," he said. "I need to talk to somebody over there."

"We'll try, but they can't come," said Lee-Lee.

He didn't understand.

"I told you. There's a wreck on the highway," she said. "The UPS man is sitting right here trying to call his supervisor. He couldn't get out the main entrance. They've got everybody from the sheriff's office and the state police there, too. Something spilled all over the highway."

Something toxic and odorless, no doubt. The kind of substance that caused serious hallucinations of the sort Henley wished he were having right now.

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"Are you telling me that the main road to the campus is closed, too?"

"For right now. Yes sir."

He took a look upward toward the sky gods as they mocked him, half hoping he'd see a crew from one of those terrible hidden-camera shows pop out and tell him it was a big joke. But it wasn't. The highway was blocked. A tree was down at the residential entrance. The service road was inaccessible because of the drainage ditch. Everyone here was stuck on campus, and nobody could get in or out.

And he had a class in fifty minutes.

Steam hung in the air, and warm water dripped from the recently quieted showerhead. Henley turned to leave the shower and saw a small smear of something brownish red and filthy across the tiles at the base of the small step leading into the shower room. He got closer. It was mud. Had the woman been left here to get mud washed from her body? He remembered Lawrence Altick's car, then left the room and walked to the office of the gym, where he dialed the number for the guesthouse directly. Louanne Parker, the manager, picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Hi, Driscoll," she said. "Enjoyed the play last night. And my nieces loved it."

He asked her to get Trent Burke.

"He's not back yet," she said. "He's gone out for a jog."

"He'll be back in a few minutes," said Henley. "Ask him to call me, would you? He can reach me through Lee-Lee at the switchboard."

Then he called the switchboard himself. Lee-Lee had a message for him. "Mr. Lester just called to ask where you were."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course I told him," she said. "That's my job. Now I'm telling you that he's looking for you."

"How did he sound?"

"You don't want him to find you."

Len must have found out about the missing atlas. It was not the time to discuss library fines. Henley left the coaches' office and found Ned in the concrete hallway, standing uncertainly by the door. "Lock up the room," Henley said. "The police will be delayed. Lock up the whole building, for that matter. Is anybody in here?"

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Before Ned could answer, Henley's least promising student, Gordon Warriner, turned the corner and nearly collided with him. He was big for a sophomore, the kind of boy who matured physically very early and then spent the next ten years of his life looking exactly the way he'd appeared when he was fifteen, the kind who could buy beer without a fake ID, who shaved every day, and whose emotional development usually lagged far behind the physical.

"Can I get into the weight room now?" he asked. Although he knew that students were not permitted gym time during the academic day, he already had his tie loosened and his shirt unbuttoned. Beneath it he wore a Virginia T-shirt. His belt was loose in his khakis, and his ankle-length boots were untied. He had a square face with some blond stubble on his cheeks and uncontrollable blond hair. He looked like a lover hastily undressing for a rendezvous. His boots and trousers were splashed with mud.

"What have you been up to?" Henley asked.

"I've been riding my bike."

Of course. He'd been riding his bike. That was no doubt true; and was no doubt a very extensively edited report of what he'd been doing. A student could show up for class missing a shoe, bleeding from abrasions on the face and arms, limping, and soaking wet, and if questioned would say that he'd been studying in the library and had simply lost track of time.

"You've been in a mud fight down at the service road."

Warriner just grinned at him.

"Haven't you?"

"It was a protest, Mr. Henley. We were complaining about the destruction of our campus ecosystem."

"By flinging dirt at each other?"

"You should see the shirt I was wearing," said Warriner. "It looks worse than your jacket."

"And you pushed mud into the ditch and rubbed it all over Mr. Altick's car."

Gordon Warriner's expression changed. He could grasp that he might actually get into some trouble. "We just added to the stuff that was already there," he said. "We knew Mr. Altick wouldn't care."

"We? Who?"

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"A bunch of guys, Mr. Henley. We were just throwing a few mudballs."

Henley wondered. This boy was quite mature physically. Was he here to use the weight room or to check on Alice Burke's body? But the casting was all wrong. Gordon Warriner wasn't a good enough actor to be concealing a murder. "Don't you have a class?" asked Henley.

"Not till fourth period. Mr. Altick canceled his classes today."

"Canceled?" Henley didn't like cancellations.

"He left a note on the blackboard. No classes. I heard from the first-period group."

"You haven't seen Mr. Altick today?"

"No sir."

"Do you have any idea of where he might be?"

Gordon Warriner put on his blandest expression. "Maybe he's in the faculty locker room," he said. "Mr. Altick really likes to use the faculty locker room."

"Go to the library and study."

"I don't have any work."

"Go."

"But Mr. Henley—"

"Get thee to a nunnery. Leave."

Henley watched the boy turn and exit the building. He was developing a very bad panic about Lawrence Altick and needed to find him immediately. "Ned," he said, "has Lawrence Altick been here today?"

Ned hadn't seen him. "I found some wet towels this morning," he said. "Whoever left them was in here awful early."

That could have been anyone on the faculty. Everyone who worked at Foxborough had a passkey to the gym. Slow down, sort it out, get your priorities straight. Forty minutes to class time. "I'm going to go find Trent Burke," said Henley. "Ned, you keep the place locked, all right? Until the police come."

Ned pulled out his keys and waved Henley away.

Henley started from the building via the same way he'd come in and then changed his mind. If Len Lester was on his way from the switchboard, then he'd be approaching the gym from the front of the building. Henley could therefore avoid him by sneaking out the private entrance down by the faculty men's locker room. He retraced his steps down the hall and took the stairs down to the lowest level, the swimming pool level, where

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a door to the outside faced the door to the men's faculty locker room. It was unlikely that Lawrence Altick would be here, but he might as well check. He pushed open the door and nearly collided with Len Lester, who was buckling his trousers.

Len was squat and heavy. He'd played tackle in college and still had the build, though Henley could never understand how anybody as fastidious as Len was about the library collection could have tolerated getting himself down into the grass and the dirt to play football. His hair was slick and wet. He wore no jacket, and his shirt was, as always, unbuttoned at the collar because his neck was too big. His tie more or less held the edges of his collar together. His face was twelve inches from Henley's, and he was mad. He wasted no time on such amenities as a greeting.

"Just on my way upstairs to find you," he said. "Lee-Lee told me you were in the building."

Len had called on the telephone here in the locker room. Henley wished Lee-Lee had included that detail in her reporting. But there was no need to tell Len that he'd been trying to dodge him. "Here I am," he said. "At your service."

"How could you do it, Driscoll? I thought you had more integrity."

"Len, it was a spur of the moment—"

"Like hell it was," said Len Lester. "You've had weeks to plan the whole thing."

"True," said Henley, "but I didn't realize I'd need a map until yesterday."

Len stood back an inch to reconsider. "Map? What map?"

Henley had an idea that he had perhaps said too much. "The map of Italy," he said. "You know." He could see from Lester's purpling face that he had not known. "The world atlas I borrowed from the library."

Len's pumpkin face turned into a furious jack-o'-lantern. "You're the one who took my atlas? That's a noncirculating item."

"I wanted to show the cast—"

"You took my atlas, you son of a bitch." Lester stepped back in appalled astonishment, as if Henley had just confessed to the Manson killings.

"Isn't that what this is all about?" asked Henley. He wanted to turn over and find his alarm clock ringing and learn that it

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had all been a dream, a terrible dream, but Len Lester charged back at him.

"I'm suspending your borrowing privileges for the rest of the year," he said.

"Fair enough." There were only three weeks left in the school year anyway.

"And I'm writing you up for the Head."

"She'll appreciate that, I'm sure."

"You're a disgrace, Driscoll. We have an honor system at this school, and you might observe it yourself."

"I should have left a note," said Henley. "You're right about that. But the book is perfectly safe—"

"I'm not talking about the book. I'm talking about those meretricious Director's Notes you wrote for the playbill last night."

Now Henley was baffled. "There's something wrong with my Director's Notes?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Driscoll."

Was this really happening? The body of Alice Burke was lying upstairs in a tiled shower, and Len Lester was behaving as if Henley had been the one to leave her there.

"Driscoll," said Len Lester, "come here." He motioned Henley to follow him farther into the faculty locker room. Henley didn't spend much time in here himself. He took his exercise by walking, and he didn't need to change clothes for that. The room was a smaller version of the boys' locker room, beige carpeting and, for lockers, open wooden cubicles painted green. Lester led him to a far corner and pulled a crumpled playbill from the top shelf. "Read this sentence aloud to me. And the next one." Henley was about to lose his patience entirely, but he resisted. " 'With this production we risk something no one has ever tried before,' " he read. " 'We cut the last act of the play entirely and allow the climactic courtroom scene to serve as the culmination of the action.' Is that the part you wanted?"

"That's the part," said Len Lester. Len snatched the playbill back from Henley as if Henley might try to destroy the evidence. He fingered several other loose papers scattered among the toiletries on the shelf of his cubicle. "Now look at this." He pulled out a computer printout on green tractor-feed paper. "You checked out Robert Speight's book on Shakespearean stage history two months ago and kept it for six weeks. You think I'd forget all the overdue notices I had to send you? And Speight's

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book clearly states that Henry Irving cut the last act of the play in the nineteenth century!"

Henley was dumbfounded. "You went to that much trouble to check?"

"I did."

It was almost gratifying to think that somebody would pay that much attention to what he'd written. And then what Len was telling him registered. "Henry Irving cut the last act of *Merchant?*"

"As if you didn't know, Driscoll."

"I didn't," he said. "Well, if I did know it, I forgot it. Besides, I was talking about high-school productions."

"Sure," said Len Lester. "Easy to say now."

Henley was aware that there was a dead body upstairs, that he had class in thirty-five minutes, that the Head of School was trapped off campus, that members of the board were in residence today, and that the police were unable to get themselves here. He suddenly found it very difficult to keep his focus. "Len," he said, "it's not that big a thing. Nobody reads the Director's Notes anyway."

"I do," said Lester. He straightened the papers on the shelf of his cubicle.

It occurred to Henley that such papers didn't belong here. "How did your playbill from the show last night end up here in the faculty locker room this morning?"

Lester looked back at him indignantly. "I brought it," he said. "I was over here for my morning swim."

"Did you see anybody upstairs?"

Lester was becoming impatient. "I didn't go upstairs," he said. "I never go upstairs. What's with the third degree, Driscoll?"

Henley wouldn't answer. "You never saw Lawrence Altick? I've been trying to find him."

"I haven't seen him since intermission of the show last night. But when I do see him, I'm going to hand him a bill. Look at these shoes. They're ruined." On the floor of Len Lester's locker cubicle were a pair of running shoes. They were covered in fresh mud, the same mud he'd seen on the wall of the shower, on the shoes of Gordon Warriner, on Lawrence Altick's car. Len Lester had remarkably small feet. "That bastard's always borrowing my clothes. Now he's used my new shoes to go cross-country."

"How do you know it was Lawrence?"

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"Because he does it all the time," said Lester. "He thinks that because he's got a space next to mine, he can help himself to my stuff. Look at this." He pulled the top off his pushup bar of deodorant. "This is already half gone, and I just bought it last week."

Borrowing clothes from locker room cubicles was one of the more unfortunate Foxborough traditions that extended throughout the student body. As an old boy, Lawrence was apparently extending the habit to the faculty locker room. Henley was quite interested in the mud on the shoes.

"Why would he wear somebody else's shoes?" he asked.

"Because he didn't want to ruin his own, obviously," said Len Lester.

"You saw him at intermission?"

"When he went dancing into the night to meet with Alice Burke. They might as well have set off flares to announce their departures." Len brushed past Henley toward the door. "Get my atlas back to me this morning, Driscoll. And remember, you've lost your library privileges."

He left the room. Henley stood in the locker room and thought about mud. A blue blazer similar to the one Henley was wearing hung in the cubicle assigned to Lawrence Altick. No other clothes. No necktie. A bulging gym bag sat on the floor. Henley knew he was tampering with the private property of a colleague, but he didn't care. He unzipped the gym bag and froze. The bag was stuffed with wadded clothing: the blue dress Alice Burke had worn last night, the black shoes. Stockings, underwear, a string of pearls, and two pearl earrings.

He sat down on the bench. He needed very desperately to find Lawrence Altick, who, unless he was being set up to take the blame, had committed a terrible crime. Lawrence had canceled his classes for this morning. To give himself a head start? Henley tried to reconstruct the scenario: Lawrence Altick met Alice Burke at the play and, during intermission, arranged for a little romance down by the service road in his car. He'd be unlikely to take her back to his apartment in the dorm, where students could see them entering and departing. Henley could imagine the scene there, the groveling in the mud, the playing on the hood of the car and in the ditch. But why would he kill her? Henley would have to leave the motive alone for now. Apparently Lawrence had considered burying her in the ditch down on the

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service road—hence the borrowed shoes from Len Lester—but then had changed his mind. Why wash her body off here in the gym? And leave her here to be found? And abandon the car? For that matter, why not just drive out the front entrance? But as soon as he asked that particular question, Henley could answer it: The security guards would be on the gate. And they would see something strange about him, something that would get their attention. Something like fresh mud all over the car? If a tree were blocking his only other way out, the residential entrance, then maybe he'd try to flee on foot. Or steal somebody else's car. Or hitch a ride on the highway. Or maybe he was still here on campus somewhere, hiding.

There was a telephone extension on the wall of the locker room. He picked up the receiver and got the switchboard automatically. "Is Security back on campus yet, Lee-Lee?" he asked.

"No sir, Mr. Henley."

"Tell Maintenance to get the Residential road cleared of that tree immediately. We've got to have transportation on and off the campus."

"I'll tell them." She didn't sound optimistic.

"Lee-Lee, how long has Mr. Altick's car been parked down at the service entrance? Check the security report from last night."

Pause. "They found it last night around midnight."

Twelve o'clock. Two hours after the play ended. But Trent Burke had said that Alice came back to the room sometime after he'd gone to bed and left again in the middle of the night. The clothes in Lawrence's bag were the clothes Alice wore to the play. Why would she stay in her theater clothes? Why didn't she take the time to change? The chilling thought struck Henley that perhaps it was somebody else who came back to the bedroom last night, that it wasn't Alice Burke at all, but her killer looking for something in the dark while Trent Burke slept. Looking for what? For car keys? Henley checked. There were no keys or purse in with the clothes. Louanne Parker, he remembered, would have keys to all the rooms in the guesthouse. Rooms where Lawrence Altick might hide until he could slip off campus? Louanne was one of his old girlfriends, wasn't she?

"I've got to speak to somebody in the sheriff's office right away," he said.

"Where are you?" Lee-Lee said. "Mr. Burke just called in from the guesthouse."

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Trent Burke. Henley still had to inform the man that his wife was dead. "Tell him to meet me—" He almost said here, in the gym, but then he hesitated. Was it wise to unlock the doors again before the police had seen the locker room? His instincts told him to leave the building secure. "Ask him to meet me in my office in the Arts Building. Right away, if he can. Tell him it's about his wife."

"He's supposed to be with the other trustees in thirty minutes."

"Lee-Lee."

"All right," she said.

"And I suppose the Head of School is still off campus."

"She called in on her car phone. She and the trustees are going to try walking to the main gate to meet security. They might be able to get a ride back up here."

That would be a nice turn in his fortunes, to have Suzanne back here making decisions herself. He left the gym, detoured around the library, passed the academic building, and stepped into the familiar territory of the arts building, the building Trent Burke had helped to construct with a very generous gift. Inside the cool hallway he heard the sounds of teachers and students at work in rehearsal rooms. It was shocking. Everyday life was occurring all around him. People were going through their normal routines. And he felt like Inspector Clouseau. His rectangular, windowless office was mercifully empty. But he noticed with a pang that the atlas he'd borrowed from the library yesterday was indeed missing from his desk. It was time for something today to go right.

He tried Suzanne's car phone and got no answer. Good. Maybe they were walking to the main entrance. As he hung up, he heard a footstep in the hall outside and expected to find Trent Burke. But it was Gordon Warriner, who had changed clothes from the muddy ones Henley had seen him in earlier. He carried the missing atlas from the library.

"Here you go," Warriner said. He propped the book against the wall. "Sorry about that stuff earlier, Mr. Henley."

"You're the one who took this book?"

"Mr. Altick said I could."

"Mr. Altick?"

"Last night. During the play. I was in here reading the atlas. You know, for history class. Mr. Altick came in at intermission and told me I could take it back to the dorm."

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"Why would he do that?"

"He was having a meeting in here. With Mr. Lester and that lady."

"Mr. Lester? The librarian? Came in here with a lady? What lady?"

"That young one. That TWILK."

It was a campus acronym that Henley knew but did not endorse. TWILK: Trustee's Wife I'd Like Knowing.

"Mrs. Burke," said Henley.

"Yeah," said Gordon Warriner. "I left just before they got here. But Mr. Lester was mad. I could hear him yelling at Mr. Altick even with the door closed."

Henley's head was spinning. "Mr. Lester and Mr. Altick were here in my office during the play?"

"At intermission. With the TWILK."

"That's a very crude, tasteless term, Gordon."

"Yes sir. Sorry."

"And Mr. Lester was shouting at Mr. Altick. You're sure about that?"

"Yes sir. I just couldn't hear the individual words so good."

"So well."

"So well. But I could sure hear the noise. Mr. Lester was raging."

"Yes," said Henley. He was thinking very hard. "At the gym today you told me that Mr. Altick really liked to use the faculty locker room. Liked to use the faculty locker room for what?"

Warriner shifted into the dumbness gear. "For whatever," he said. "You know."

Henley unfortunately could guess. "He's been boasting to his classes, hasn't he? About how he uses the faculty locker room for . . . dating purposes."

Warriner grinned. "He said he used to sneak in over there when he was a student during school dances."

"That'll be all, Gordon. Thank you." The boy left, and Henley dialed the library. Len Lester picked up the phone on the second ring. "Len," he said, "I think we need to talk."

"Then talk," said Len.

"Over here in my office," said Henley. He wouldn't venture onto Len's turf. "I need to talk to you about Lawrence Altick and Alice Burke."

Just a brief pause. "What about them?"

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"You missed the second act of the show last night, didn't you?"

"I was a little late returning to the theater, Driscoll. I came here to the library to expose your fraudulent Director's Notes."

A very weak story. "I know what's going on, Len. I know about Alice and Lawrence. And you, too. I'd like to see you now."

Pause. "I'll be right over."

He next called the guesthouse. It took Louanne several rings to answer.

"Sorry, Driscoll," she said. "I was napping. I'm exhausted after last night."

For one panicky moment Henley wondered if Louanne was indeed involved. "Busy evening?"

"Both twins got sick after the play. I was up and down with one or the other all night long."

She was clear. "Good," said Henley, before he could catch himself.

"What?"

"I was just relieved," he said. Scramble, think, cover. "I mean that they had somebody like you to look after them."

When she transferred his call to Harold Fowler, he wasted no time. "Harold," he said, "were you sleeping during the second act of the play last night?"

Harold answered without hesitation. "Absolutely," he said in his high voice. "Sorry, Driscoll, but I couldn't help dozing off. I remember sort of settling down into my seat and resting my head on the back wall of the theater."

"Right by the door to the lobby." Henley was hoping Harold would be able to tell him how long Len Lester had been gone during the second act.

"No, that's the aisle seat. We left that one on the aisle empty for Alice. Then came Trent's seat. Then another empty one. Then mine. The fourth seat in from the aisle. It's nice and quiet back there."

Patience, patience. "What do you remember of the second act?"

"The lights going down after intermission. And then I looked up, and there was Trent, standing there, whooping and cheering. He was the first one up to start the standing ovation. Everybody was applauding the actors during their bows."

Incredible. Harold had slept through the entire second half of the play. "Do you remember seeing Len Lester there at the end of the show? The librarian?"

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"Sure, he was there. Len was a few seats down. But he didn't look happy. I noticed he wasn't clapping."

Nothing there. "You say Trent sat one seat off the aisle, Harold. Right by the door. So he could have seen anybody using that aisle to come and go."

"If he wasn't wrapped up in the play, Driscoll." Harold sounded puzzled, but Henley didn't stop to explain. He could only hope that Trent Burke had been observant of traffic during the second act.

He hung up and heard footsteps and male voices in the hall. His mind was in overdrive. He now knew who the killer of Alice Burke was. It was the only way to explain all the facts. Who would have guessed? But of course it made sense; the man was violently ill-tempered and obviously irrational. Now, how to prove it? The class bell would ring in eight minutes. Could he manage it in eight minutes? There was one way that just might work.

Trent Burke and Len Lester entered the office together. Trent had changed into a dark business suit for the Board meeting. He carried a briefcase and glanced at his watch. "Len and I met outside," he said. "I don't know which of us you want to see first, but I've got a meeting very soon—"

Poor Trent. But Henley had to make a tradeoff: He'd sacrifice the trustee's feelings in order to expose the librarian as a murderer. "I need to see you both."

"Is this about Alice?" said Burke.

Henley had to improvise flawlessly. "Yes," he said. He looked at Len Lester. "Alice is dead." And now he had to take his chance, to make his guess, to play his best shot. If he was going to trap Len Lester, he needed to do it now, with a witness in the room. It would be hard and cruel to Trent, but the stakes were too high. "And so is Lawrence Altick. They were both killed last night."

Trent Burke slid into a chair and dropped his briefcase onto the floor. "What's this?" he said. "What do you mean?"

Len Lester remained standing by the door. He stared at Henley without moving. But he looked ready either to pounce or to bolt.

"Shut the door, Len," said Henley. "Sit down."

Lester did as he was told. He never took his eyes off Henley.

"There were rumors she'd been having an affair," said Henley. Trent Burke's face grew paler. "And the natural candidate would

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be our own campus Lothario, Lawrence Altick. But Alice may have had more than one partner on campus. And there was a great jealousy at work. I suspect that if we start digging in one of the spots where the dirt was recently filled into the new drainage ditch, we'll find Lawrence's body." He stared at Len Lester, whose eyes moved from Henley to Trent Burke in the chair beside him. Henley prayed that he would jump up and run, that he would betray his guilt in some way. But he remained in his chair and spoke quietly.

"Alice is really dead?" he said. It sounded so artificial, such an amateurish performance to Henley's ears.

"We were at the play," said Trent Burke. He sounded so sad.

"I know that," said Henley. "Alice left at intermission. So did you, Len. You didn't notice how late he was returning to his seat, did you, Trent?"

Trent Burke shook his head. But Len Lester was already talking. "Of course I left during intermission. I got into a huge argument with Lawrence about your pathetic Director's Notes. He'd actually tried to defend you. So I went to the library to look up the records."

There might be a touch of truth in that. But Henley sensed that they had argued over more than Shakespearean stage history. "Alice never came back to the play," said Henley. "I think she was going off to the gym to meet up with Lawrence. And to be followed there and killed. You were furious with her, weren't you, Len? You were supposed to have a date with her yourself that night, and she was with another."

Both men looked at Henley and turned paler. Henley could see that he had guessed correctly.

"I told her to forget it," said Len Lester. "I'm the one who canceled, not Alice. I'm not so desperate that I have to compete with Lawrence Altick."

Trent Burke stared at him in astonishment. "You? And my wife?"

Len Lester spoke to Henley. "I'm going to kill you for this, Driscoll." That was it, then. Practically a confession.

Trent Burke looked very small and wounded, like a student who couldn't believe he'd received a failing grade. "She was seeing Lawrence Altick and you?"

Len Lester squirmed in his chair like a restless bowling ball. He was losing his temper rapidly. "She was seeing a hell of a lot more people than just Lawrence and me."

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"You were the early morning guy," said Trent Burke. "The one she'd leave to meet before dawn. I . . . I thought there was only one." He groaned, sobbed, caught himself.

Henley regretted his decision to have Trent present. But he pushed ahead. He had to get Len angry enough to make a mistake. "It's very easy for me to block the scene. Lawrence was killed and driven off in his own car to be buried. That's why your shoes were so muddy, Len. It wasn't Lawrence who borrowed them, as you said a little while ago."

Len Lester spoke very softly. "I hope you realize where you're going, Driscoll."

"Oh, I do," said Henley. "There was mud on the tiles of the shower stall. I thought at first it was Alice who had been muddy and needed to be washed off. But then I realized that it was the hot water that mattered. It would keep her body warm and distort the time of her death. Then it was just a matter of stuffing her clothes into Lawrence's gym bag so that it would look as if he had killed her. It was the killer who left the mud. The mud that was on your shoes, Len. All that remains is the question of Alice's mysterious return to her room in the guesthouse during the night. She was never actually there, was she?"

Trent Burke wiped his eyes, sighed, and then straightened his shoulders, as if to engage a different realm of his brain. He shook his head. "It's a wonderful try, Driscoll, but forget it," he said. "You can't prove any of this. I should know. I'm an attorney."

"I can prove all of it, can't I, Len?" He hoped his bluff sounded convincing. "Len? You want to tell us what happened at intermission during your trip to the gym?"

Len Lester took a deep breath. "Driscoll," he said. He was so furious that he had to begin again. "Driscoll. Get this straight. I went to the library at intermission. I missed the first part of the second act. But I was back in time to see the end. At no time did I go to the gym. Do you understand that? At no time did I go to the gym."

"You see?" said Trent Burke. His voice trembled. "There's no way to prove any of this. Check with Harold Fowler."

"Don't worry," said Henley. "I did ask Harold. He said you had a seat right by the door. Can't you tell us what time Len returned?"

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"No," said Trent. "But I watched the whole second act, I swear it. The courtroom scene, where Portia tricks Shylock into thinking he'll get away with it. And then all the business afterwards in Belmont, with the rings and the lovers."

Now both Henley and Len Lester stared at Trent Burke, the white-haired trustee who sat with such dignity in his business suit. Henley had the very awful feeling that he'd spilled more than gravy this time.

"Trent," he said, "what was the very last thing you saw on stage before the actors took their bows?"

Trent Burke sat silently. Both men watched him. "Don't hold me accountable for getting it all word for word," said Burke. "I read the play before I saw it, so I might be remembering some lines differently."

Henley pressed him again. "The last scene before the curtain call, Trent. What was it?"

Burke rubbed his forehead, closed his eyes, opened and closed his fists. "All that silly stuff," he said. " 'Where's my ring? Why'd you give it away?' That sort of thing."

No one spoke for a long time. It was Len Lester who broke the silence. "That scene was cut," said Lester. "How could you have seen what was never on stage to begin with?"

Trent Burke kept trying. "You know what I mean," he said. "Lorenzo and Jessica listening to the music. And Portia coming home."

"Shakespeare's fifth act was cut, Trent," said Len. "The whole thing. I think Driscoll got you."

Trent Burke was speechlessly indignant for only a moment, and then he collapsed. "I don't care anymore," he said. "She was such a liberal. She would embrace every cause and everybody. Except me." He paused. "My big mistake was to say that she'd come back to the room in the middle of the night. I thought it would help confuse the time of her death. But then I also thought the evening guy and the morning guy were the same person."

Henley was flabbergasted. "You killed your wife," he said. He was thinking out loud, but Trent Burke thought it was more of a prompt.

"Yes," said Burke. "Of course. As soon as I saw Harold drift off to sleep, I slipped out of the theater. I knew where they were going. She would actually taunt me with tales of her frolics in the men's locker room. I'd read the play beforehand so that I'd

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know how much time I'd have. But I barely made it back before the house lights came up. I stepped into the auditorium just as the bows began. I didn't even have a chance to sit down. You caught me, Driscoll. It was all just as you said. I killed them both in the locker room, borrowed Len's shoes, changed into some gym shorts from the clothes bins, drove Lawrence down to the ditch, and buried him. Ned had left plenty of towels out for a shower afterward. I wrote EARTH FIRST on the car. I even remembered to print a message on his blackboard announcing the cancellation of his classes for today. I thought maybe if Alice's body got found in the gym and her things were in Lawrence's gym bag, the police would figure that he'd killed her and run off in a panic."

Henley had to use every muscle in his body to keep himself from fainting.

Len Lester cleared his throat. "You should have read the Director's Notes, Trent." The bell rang for class. Noise of students moving through the halls drifted into the office.

Lee-Lee's voice came across on the walkie-talkie. "The highway's clear. Security's back on campus. The sheriff says he can be here in two minutes."

Henley was back in control. "Send him down to my office," said Henley. "Len, I think you can wait here with Trent until the sheriff arrives." Trent Burke sat in his chair and wept. Henley pointed toward the atlas leaning against the wall. "I'll get that back to the library as soon as my borrowing privileges get reinstated, Len."

Len Lester regarded Henley with admiration. "Driscoll," he said, "that was brilliant. The way you orchestrated his confession so cleverly . . . How did you spot him as the killer?"

Henley stood up and grabbed a notebook. There was no way in hell that he'd ever tell Len the truth. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I try to explain it all now, then I'll be late for class."

And he left. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

by Art Taylor

In 1994, Art Taylor published two stories, one in the poetry magazine *Spout*, and the other in a small North Carolina magazine entitled *Wellspring*. As neither of these stories involved crime or mystery, we celebrate the author's mystery fiction debut with this new piece for *EQMM*, which is also his first publication in a national magazine. †

Caroline leaned weakly on Edward's arm as they were herded along endless cement walkways and down another flight of stairs. Edward, standing tall to offer better support, had twice glimpsed the sparkling blue and gold train, but he worried that it was taking so long to reach it. After the champagne Kir and the delightful bottle of Chateau de Gaudou on the Pullman carriage and the mysterious blush that they had been given in the reception area in Folkestone, the *Sea-Cat*'s turbulent crossing had been less than acceptable. Caroline had seemed to turn an even whiter shade of pale when the little English girl across the aisle had thrown up into a paper cup, and with the woman behind them, another American, quietly chanting that she was going to be sick, going to be sick, in perfect time with the rise and fall of the ship, Edward had himself felt ill—both nauseated and annoyed.

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The next turn in the hallway brought them to the end of the labyrinth and the beginning of two short lines. Edward chose the one on the right because at the rear of the left one stood the Boxer. At least that was how Edward had thought of him, with his crew cut and his squat bulky build and his arrogant cockney accent. They had heard him earlier at Victoria Station, talking brashly to the woman with him, a blond frizzy-haired piece. Edward had heard the word "kissy-face" and the two of them had puckered their lips at each other in such a way that he was certain that her name was Felicia or Patsy or Krissy with a K. And he was certain now, looking at the man again, that the Boxer would not be a boxer at all but just a boxer's sparring partner or perhaps merely an actor playing one, an extra who had a cartoon name like Brutus and only got to stand in the back and frown. They were at the head of the line then. The customs official gave a perfunctory glance at the passports—a courtesy which Edward attributed to the woman's sympathy for everyone's pallor—and they found themselves on the platform at last.

"Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits," said Edward, stopping to read the shining gold letters in a fine French accent. "Des Grands Express Européens." The sun was beginning to set over Boulogne and in the twilight, the train appeared exceptionally regal. Its gleaming white roof seemed recently polished and its deep blue sides shone even more brightly up close than in his glimpses before. White-gloved porters stood attentive near the ends of each car, ready to assist with a small bag or a lady's boarding, and a bright red carpet stretched before them along the length of the platform. Edward pictured himself and Caroline as characters in a Fitzgerald novel—but only in the happier scenes—or perhaps a story by James. This was much better, he thought, and said as much aloud.

"Beautiful," echoed Caroline, and Edward looked down to find her face still pale beneath her short blond hair, her eyes still closed. She hugged herself closer to him and scrunched up her tiny nose. "Can we find our cabin? I'd like to wash up." She seemed so pitiful that he felt a softness fall over him and a desire to comfort her. He began immediately to move along the walkway.

Though they were only going to Paris, he was pleased they had been given a cabin instead of a table in the dining car—the

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usual custom waived due to the availability of rooms—but as he followed the letters hung on temporary cardboard banners from the windows of each car, he wondered why they hadn't used the four-digit numbers or the names that were already there, lettered in gold along the panels; he would much rather have been searching for "Carrozza-Letti" or even "3355" than looking for the prosaic "B." His only other thought as he walked his new wife along the platform was his hope that she would open her eyes: The red carpet seemed to pass so swiftly beneath their feet.

They had been married less than a week and he had swept her a world away from the Church of the Good Shepherd and the reception at the Cardinal Club on what he hoped would be the trip of a lifetime. This was their first excursion to Europe together and he made sure their stay in London was an elegant one. They had taken a suite at the Berkshire and shopped at Marks and Spencer down the street and strolled through Harrods. They had eaten in the cozy intimacy of Veronica's and, at the suggestion of the concierge, had taken in *Don't Dress for Dinner* at the Duchess, though Edward would personally have preferred the revival of *An Inspector Calls*. They had been pressed for time before the show and had stopped at The American Grille—their only lapse from more local cuisine—because it was quick and Caroline had felt a sudden taste for a cheeseburger. Edward regretted eating his with his hands when Caroline told him that an English couple two tables away had snickered at them and eaten theirs with a fork and knife. Except for that and the fact that they had missed the exhibition of royal wedding gowns at Kensington Palace by fifteen minutes, Edward had taken their time in London as a personal success.

But today was another matter: the centerpiece of their honeymoon, the highpoint of their trip. So far, it had gone only half and half, the channel crossing all but completely erasing the excitement of the Pullman earlier in the afternoon.

In the cabin, Edward hung up their evening clothes and settled onto the seat with its brocade of light green and black while Caroline opened the washbasin cabinet to refresh herself. He pulled out their copy of *Murder on the Orient Express*—not the first printing, which a bookseller friend had tried in vain to find, but a small 1955 Crime Club edition still well suited to their purpose; he didn't want to forget to take it to dinner or to have the cabin steward sign it. A unique souvenir, he thought, and

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Caroline had been so engrossed in reading it on the plane over. He placed it on the seat beside him. A packet of stationery and a trio of postcards lay on the mahogany table before him and he flipped through them while he waited.

"Do you wish that we were going all the way to Venice?" he asked, looking over a postcard of Canaletto's "Regatta on the Grand Canal."

"We've never been to Paris together."

"But if we could come back to Paris?" He was thinking of midnight in the bar car, breakfast in their cabin, the brochure of the Hotel Cipriani that the two of them had admired. "We could leave the curtains open when we went to bed tonight and gaze out at the Alps."

She turned and smiled, a little of the rosiness returning to her cheeks, a little of the sprite back in her blue eyes. "We would be sleeping on bunk beds," she said and came over to hug him. "And there's no shower. I couldn't leave the cabin without a shower."

"Who says we would need to leave the cabin?" He smiled and winked. He was thinking of her trousseau and each of the evenings in London, pleasantly surprised by a side of her that he had never seen. He would have taken her again right there except for the steward just outside the door and the fact that someone else would be coming into the cabin in Paris. He worried that they would know.

The train bucked from side to side as they made their way down the hallways toward the bar car. The Continental train was speeding along much faster than the British train and Edward was afraid that the movement would upset Caroline's system again. She held her hands up as she walked, bracing herself between the window and the wall, and when they reached the passways between cars, he stepped ahead to open the doors while she held on to the side rail.

He moved up again when they reached the bar car and found himself looking at Brutus, the Boxer, through the small window, the vulgar man sitting with his legs stretched out in front of the door. Edward was so unnerved by the obstruction that he found himself fumbling to turn the handle properly.

Brutus opened it for him. "Ey, mate," he laughed. "Havin' trouble with the door?" Felicia, sitting beside him, laughed as

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well and Edward felt himself blushing and unable to speak as he let Caroline step through before him. Boxer, he thought. Extra. The man had carried the word "door" out to what seemed like a full three syllables and didn't even pull his feet in when they walked past. As Edward stepped over the ill-mannered legs, he felt a pat on his back and heard the cockney whisper: "Don' worry, friend. Just havin' a bit o' fun."

Edward's back stiffened but he didn't comment. Instead, he continued to the bar, ordering a martini for himself and a small Coca-Cola for his wife. Turning, he saw that another couple had joined Brutus and Felicia and the party seemed to take up the whole end of the car. Brutus had lit a cigar and was puffing big billows of smoke into the air, gesturing broadly, and bellowing like a hyena. Felicia leaned suggestively against his shoulder, breathing in his fumes and echoing his laugh. Edward thought for a moment how his position had been reversed; in novels, one always read about the genteel Englishman and the bellicose American. And yet, there they were.

The four of them crossed paths again an hour later. Felicia and the Boxer were seated across the aisle from Edward and Caroline at dinner—the early seating for those passengers disembarking in Paris—and Edward wished once more that they were continuing to Venice so that some part of the journey might take place without the Boxer's incivility.

Edward had expected the evening to be the pinnacle of excellence, both in terms of the food and the atmosphere, and he and Caroline had changed for the meal: Edward into the tuxedo he had worn at their wedding, while Caroline wore a lavender evening dress that she had chosen just for the occasion and a string of pearls that Edward had given her at their rehearsal dinner. She also carried a small black purse to hold the novel which they hoped the chef would sign; Edward, afraid that carrying a book in to dinner might be improper, had preferred they be discreet.

Despite the recommendation of black-tie for dinner, few of their fellow diners had gone to as much trouble as they had. The East Asian woman two tables down appeared elegant enough, but her husband only dressed to the extent of a dark jacket and taupe pants, and a quartet of businessmen diagonal to them huddled in the charcoal suits they had worn in the afternoon. The Shrimptons, whom they had met on the Pullman that after-

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noon, were dressed in church attire farther down the car; he worked with the Bank of England and it was their twenty-fifth anniversary, though they hardly seemed to Edward old enough for that. Felicia and Brutus were still wearing their casual clothes. The Boxer's khaki pants were wrinkled and the tie he had added was a smidgen too wide. Felicia's outfit was so tight and red that Edward thought it just short of tawdry, tolerable for the afternoon but entirely out of place as evening wear. The two of them had been seated at a table for four and were soon met by the couple who had joined them in the bar—a rough-looking pair as well. The four of them had continued to smoke and carry on.

Edward tried his best to ignore them and was pleased that Caroline as well pretended to be unfazed by it all. Her color had come back and she had told Edward that she felt well enough to share another bottle of wine. He saw the steward—a large Italian—at the next table and glanced over the menu to help with his decision.

Neither of them would touch the smoked eel appetizer, but the steamed lobster and leeks with foie gras sounded delicious and the same was true of the entree: a fillet of lamb in spiced wine and red currants, with sautéed potatoes and vegetables. The usual cheese would follow the meal and then a chestnut pancake and *migniardises* for dessert. The wine steward was stepping over to take their selection just as Edward turned to peruse the cartes de vins.

"And then this namby-pamby-lookin' Yank gent comes strollin' along the way they do," came the cockney voice quietly from the table across the aisle and Edward felt certain that the Boxer was talking about him. He closed his menu even as the steward was approaching. *"Buona séra, signóra, signór."*

Over the next few minutes, Edward realized that his ears had somehow managed to miss the essential part of both conversations. His wife, upholding his opinion of her as a model of discernment, took it upon herself to ask the steward for his recommendation. But though he heard her tell him that she didn't like anything too dry, he did not hear the name of the wine suggested. And though he heard the Boxer speaking of wanting to "mash" the namby-pamby "right there" and his companion's question as to why he didn't, Edward could discern no further evidence that he was the one being discussed. There had

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been a "laughing," he knew, and "words passed," and the "namby-pamby" hadn't stood his ground, but by the time they seemed to be moving to the crux of the story, he found himself listening to his wife as she gave her assent. *"Grazia, signóra,"* said the wine steward and passed between Edward and the party across the aisle.

"And all this happened right there on the street?"

"Right there, not a stone's throw from the Bow Bells, mark my words."

So they had not been talking about him, thought Edward, relieved, and added under his breath that Brutus the Boxer looked like one who might have thrown stones.

"What?" asked his wife.

"Oh, nothing," said Edward. "Just talking to myself." And he adjusted the napkin on his lap.

The eel was brought then with a small dish of caviar, and the wine arrived almost immediately after, though the Italian broke the seal and removed the cork without Edward's being able to see the label. He felt certain that he would be given the opportunity to examine the bottle and taste it before it was served, but the man poured the wine into Caroline's glass instead. Flustered, Edward glanced quickly around at the other tables. The Asians were still examining the menu and the businessmen were engrossed in conversation, but he could almost feel the Boxer's eyes cutting his way. He pretended to be looking at the lacquered ebony wall panels where painted yellow pelicans dove for fish. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Caroline taste the wine and nod her assent.

It was a Bordeaux, he saw, peeking under the linen once the bottle had been left in its cooler: Sauternes. He had always thought of it as a dessert wine and wondered at the waiter's choice as he touched the glass to his lips. It looked gold and thick like olive oil; it tasted like honey.

"Is it all right?" Across the table, his wife wrinkled her forehead.

"Excellent," he nodded, scanning the wine list again, guilty for not having paid the proper attention. He would undoubtedly have chosen the '91 Pouilly-Fuissé, he thought, closing the menu, and cringed when he saw a bottle of it standing at the Boxer's elbow, which rested on the table as if it belonged.

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The fish course appeared next, the red and white lobster centered in a creamy yellow sauce, with the leeks laid in a tick-tack-toe pattern across it and the pâté placed delicately to the side. He ordered a bottle of Pellegrino water from the waiter and sipped the honey again, watching the Boxer point his cigar at his dinner companion and imbibe his own wine with obvious pleasure. The waiter had served the four of them their lobster and Brutus continued to rail on as he ate. Edward could see the flesh of the lobster as the man chewed and talked, and as the meal wore on into the next course, Edward watched the lamb and the potatoes turn into a mash between his teeth. At one point, the Boxer's mouth was so full as he spoke that a chunk of lamb flew from his mouth and landed on the table. "Whoops," he said, bringing his hand up in a puerile gesture of covering his mouth. Behind it, his lips were stretched into a schoolboy's grin. Felicia popped his arm lightly with her fist.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Caroline. "You've hardly said a word all through dinner and you've barely touched your food."

Edward turned back to look at his wife and in a glance detected that she was as crestfallen as he was. Her eyes, fairly shining with disappointment, seemed to plead with him for something that he feared he couldn't provide. "I had just wanted this evening to be perfect," he said and knew that there was nothing to be gained by ordering another bottle of wine this late in the meal—that there were no other tables to move to and no possibility of asking Brutus to cease his ill manners.

Caroline reached across and took his hand. "Everything's fine." Her touch was warm but he could hear her lack of conviction, and he wished again that they were continuing to Venice. Those fortunate passengers were already moving through the first dining car on their way to the second seating. They were all dressed in crisp tuxedos and evening gowns, and two Scotsmen had worn dinner jackets over bright formal kilts. Edward was certain that the dinner for the people continuing to Italy would be different and that the extra time aboard the train would give the journey time to redeem itself. But it was too late now to change their plans; someone had already claimed their cabin for the balance of the journey, and Edward and Caroline had months before made their own reservations at the Ambassador in Paris.

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"I had just planned," he sighed again, "on everything being so perfect."

The chestnut pancake arrived then: a crepe-thin puff folded up like a flowerbud and drizzled with a light orange syrup. As the dessert was served, the chef entered the car in his dress whites and moved from table to table greeting the guests. Edward lacked the enthusiasm to ask his wife for the book but she was already handing it across.

"Le diner, c'est merveilleux," Edward told the chef with a good show of sincerity. He handed the book to him. *"Votre signature, s'il vous plaît. Pour souvenir."*

The man glanced at the title and smiled, his tall white hat bobbing with his nod.

Pour souvenir. Le chef de cuisine, Ch. Bodiguel, Edward read after it was handed back and the chef had moved to the next table. He glanced over the other names from the afternoon: Alan their waiter on the Pullman, who said he traveled to the States once a year for the Kentucky Derby; the Shrimptons, who had offered *Best Wishes from 25 Years Ahead* and signed their names *David and Rosemary.*

He turned to the title page then, because he had heard Brutus call out, "What's 'at?" and wanted to wait for him to ask a second time. Even without looking, he could see in his mind the Boxer pointing his fork at the book, a grotesque image of smacking lips and teeth dripping with the pancake's orange syrup. As he reread the title a fourth and then a fifth time, he entertained the thought that there *would* be a murder and Brutus the victim. When he asks me again, I'll tell him that we call it a book, he thought, and he overenunciated the word in his mind. And then if he's insolent enough to ask the name, I'll pass it across to Caroline without showing it and tell him it's *The Origin of Species* and that he should be familiar with it. Edward was well into the copyright page when he thought that the sarcasm might be too subtle and then he realized that the dining car had gone quiet and slowly became aware that the Boxer had begun to choke.

Suddenly everyone was standing, either moving toward the flailing man or stepping back in horror. Felicia was screaming and jumping up and down, her face twisted in shock, her arms flailing helplessly as her body shook in fear. The Boxer's arms were spinning as well, striking glasses from the table, thrashing

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at the people around him, on his right hand a single finger sticking out like it was pointing at something in the air.

"Heimlich maneuver," shouted Edward. "A doctor, a doctor." The wine steward had already managed to wrap his arms around the Boxer, and he lifted the bulky man up in the air, jarring his body, pulling and pulling against his chest until finally, a lump of pancake flung itself from his mouth. But Edward could see from the Boxer's color and his puffy face that help had come too late.

Soon, they were back in their cabin. Caroline sat by the window, staring out at the lights that passed so slowly in the distance. Edward had opened the cabinet again and was washing his hands in the small porcelain basin. In the mirror, he caught sight of himself and noticed that his hair was going prematurely gray.

Brutus was dead, and Edward, despite all of his attempts at rational thinking, had been unable to dismiss his sense of responsibility for the death. He could see it no other way, given the malice he had felt and the timing. The dead man had been choked in trying to wash down his pancake with the wine that Edward had envied so greatly—choked while trying to ask a question that Edward had pretended not to hear—and Edward felt sure that the Boxer's pointing finger had been aiming for him. The Boxer's real name, it turned out, was Henry Doppler and Felicia's name was Margaret and they had just been married. She had still been in hysterics when Edward and Caroline left the car, and no one had been able to learn any more than that.

Edward could not help but feel guilty, and neither could he escape the thought, obviously secondary, that he had not only killed a man, but in doing so had ruined his and Caroline's special evening completely. His selfishness in thinking this sent him into an even deeper state of guilt and he feared, for a moment, that he would be unable to find his way out. But they would be in Paris soon, he thought, pulling into the Gare de L'Est, taking the cab to the Opera Quarter, walking under the chandeliers of the Hotel Ambassador, and he felt a little strengthened by these images and hopeful that the darkness of the evening would disappear against the glitter of the city.

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"Do you think he was poisoned?" asked Caroline, and he realized the question carried the first words she had spoken since they had returned to their room.

He wiped his hands and turned to look at her. Even from that distance, he could see the strange twinkle in her eye.

"I don't know why," she went on. "I guess it was his looks, the shape of his head, and the way he acted, and my reading that book on the plane—but I had a notion from the first moment I saw him that he was a British gangster and that the woman with him was his moll. I thought that the other couple in the bar car were a part of his gang or the other man the leader of a friendly gang and that they were planning something together. And when he began to choke and point that finger like a gun, I was certain that it was a double cross and that the other man had poisoned his food while he asked you about the book. Or maybe the chef was really with British Intelligence and had himself laced the dessert with arsenic before it ever came out. After all, didn't you think it tasted more like almonds than chestnuts?"

She stood up then and rushed quickly to hug him.

"Oh, darling, I'm sorry he's dead, but wouldn't it have been romantic if we *had* gone on to Venice and the murder had happened in the Alps and the train had been stuck in the snow and the murderer still on board. And you could have solved it! Or we could have solved it together! Or we could have just stayed in our cabin until they interrogated us, caught up helplessly in the drama of it all."

She looked up at him and he saw a thrill in her features that he had never seen before. She seemed transported by what had happened.

"Can you believe it?" she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I even made names for them. He was called Guido and she was Delores."

It was at that moment that Edward felt released from the crime and forgiven of his guilt and, what was greater, believed himself a success once more. He didn't know how he had done it, but he was suddenly glad that he had killed the young man. He felt more alive because of it, more gallant, more virile—so much so, in fact, that he felt sure he would have taken his new wife right then and there if the train hadn't been pulling into the station, if the cabin steward hadn't been just outside the door.

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WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

by Ian Rankin

Bernie Few's jailbreaks were an art.

And over the years he had honed his art. His escapes from prison, his shrugging off of guards and prison officers, his vanishing acts, were the stuff of lights-out stories in jails the length and breadth of Scotland. He was called "The Grease-Man," "The Blink," and many other names, including the obvious "Houdini" and the not-so-obvious "Claude" (Claude Rains having starred as the original *Invisible Man).*

Bernie Few was beautiful. As a petty thief he was hopeless, but after capture he started to show his real prowess. He wasn't made for being a housebreaker; but he surely did shine as a jailbreaker. He'd stuffed himself into rubbish bags and mail sacks, taken the place of a corpse from one prison hospital, squeezed his wiry frame out of impossibly small windows (sometimes buttering his naked torso in preparation), and crammed himself into ventilation shafts and heating ducts.

But Bernie Few had a problem. Once he'd scaled the high walls, waded through sewers, sprinted from the prison bus, or cracked his guard across the head, once he'd done all this and was outside again, breathing free air and melting into the crowd . . . his movements were like clockwork. All his ingenuity

Ian Rankin's Inspector John Rebus is beginning to develop a following in the U.S. in books from St. Martin's Press (the most recent of which is *Strip Jack)* and Otto Penzler Books (see 1994's *Hide and Seek).* Rebus's cases are not always murder investigations, but they do always have the flavor of Mr. Rankin's Edinburgh: tough, a little cynical, but always darkly humorous. A Scotsman who prefers to write about his country from a distance, Mr. Rankin lives in France with his wife and two children. ¶

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seemed to be exhausted. The prison psychologists put it differently. They said he wanted to be caught, really. It was a game to him.

But to Inspector John Rebus, it was more than a game. It was a chance for a drink.

Bernie would do three things. One, he'd go throw a rock through his ex-wife's living-room window. Two, he'd stand in the middle of Princes Street telling everyone to go to hell (and other places besides). And three, he'd get drunk in Scott's Bar. These days, option one was difficult for Bernie, since his ex-wife had not only moved without leaving a forwarding address but had, at Rebus's suggestion, gone to live on the eleventh floor of an Oxgangs tower block. No more rocks through the living-room window, unless Bernie was handy with ropes and crampons.

Rebus preferred to wait for Bernie in Scott's Bar, where they refused to water down either the whisky or the language. Scott's was a villains' pub, one of the ropiest in Edinburgh. Rebus recognised half the faces in the place, even on a dull Wednesday afternoon. Bail faces, appeal faces. They recognised him, too, but there wasn't going to be any trouble. Every one of them knew why he was here. He hoisted himself onto a barstool and lit a cigarette. The TV was on, showing a satellite sports channel. Cricket, some test between England and the West Indies. It is a popular fallacy that the Scots don't watch cricket. Edinburgh pub drinkers will watch *anything,* especially if England are involved, more especially if England are odds on to get a drubbing. Scott's, as depressing a watering hole as you could ever imagine, had transported itself to the Caribbean for the occasion.

Then the door to the toilets opened with a nerve-jarring squeal, and a man loped out. He was tall and skinny, loose-limbed, hair falling over his eyes. He had a hand on his fly, just checking prior to departure, and his eyes were on the floor.

"See youse then," he said to nobody, opening the front door to leave. Nobody responded. The door stayed open longer than it should. Someone else was coming in. Eyes flashed from the TV for a moment. Rebus finished his drink and rose from the stool. He knew the man who'd just left the bar. He knew him well. He knew, too, that what had just happened was impossible.

The new customer, a small man with a handful of coins, had a voice hoarse from shouting as he croakily ordered a pint. The barman didn't move. Instead, he looked to Rebus, who was looking at Bernie Few.

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Then Bernie Few looked at Rebus.

"Been down to Princes Street, Bernie?" Rebus asked.

Bernie Few sighed and rubbed his tired face. "Time for a short one, Mr. Rebus?"

Rebus nodded. He could do with another himself anyway. He had a couple of things on his mind, neither of them Bernie Few.

Police officers love and hate surveillance operations in more or less equal measure. There's the tedium, but even that beats being tied to a CID desk. Often on a stakeout there's a good spirit, plus there's that adrenal rush when something eventually happens.

The present surveillance was based in a second-floor tenement flat, the owners having been packed off to a seaside caravan for a fortnight. If the operation needed longer than a fortnight, they'd be sent to stay with relations.

The watchers worked in two-man teams and twelve-hour shifts. They were watching the second-floor flat of the tenement across the road. They were keeping tabs on a bandit called Ribs Mackay. He was called Ribs because he was so skinny. He had a heroin habit, and paid for it by pushing drugs. Only he'd never been caught at it, a state of affairs Edinburgh CID were keen to rectify.

The problem was, since the surveillance had begun, Ribs had been keeping his head down. He stayed in the flat, nipping out only on brief sorties to the corner shop. He'd buy beer, vodka, milk, cigarettes, sometimes breakfast cereal or a jar of peanut butter, and he'd always top off his purchases with half a dozen bars of chocolate. That was about it. There had to be more, but there wasn't any more. Any day now, the operation would be declared dead in the water.

They tried to keep the flat clean, but you couldn't help a bit of untidiness. You couldn't help nosy neighbours either: Everyone on the stairwell wondered who the strangers in the Tully residence were. Some asked questions. Some didn't need to be told. Rebus met an old man on the stairs. He was hauling a bag of shopping up to the third floor, stopping for a breather at each step.

"Help you with that?" Rebus offered.

"I can manage."

"It wouldn't be any bother."

"I said I can manage."

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Rebus shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then he climbed to the landing and gave the recognised knock on the door of the Tullys' flat.

DC Jamphlar opened the door a crack, saw Rebus, and pulled it all the way open. Rebus nipped inside.

"Here," he said, handing over a paper bag, "doughrings."

"Thank you, sir," said Jamphlar.

In the cramped living room, DC Connaught was sitting on a dining chair at the net curtain, peering through the net and out of the window. Rebus joined him for a moment. Ribs Mackay's window was grimy, but you could see through the grime into an ordinary-looking living room. Not that Ribs came to the window much. Connaught wasn't concentrating on the window. He was ranging between the second-floor window and the ground-floor door. If Ribs left the flat, Jamphlar went haring after him, while Connaught followed Ribs's progress from the window and reported via radio to his colleague.

Initially, there'd been one man in the flat and one in a car at street level. But the man at street level hadn't been needed, and looked suspicious anyway. The street was no main thoroughfare, but a conduit between Clerk Street and Buccleuch Street. There were a few shops at road level, but they carried the look of permanent closure.

Connaught glanced up from the window. "Afternoon, sir. What brings you here?"

"Any sign of him?" Rebus said.

"Not so much as a tweet."

"I reckon I know why that is. Your bird's already flown."

"No chance," said Jamphlar, biting into a doughring.

"I saw him half an hour ago in Scott's Bar. That's a fair hike from here."

"Must've been his double."

But Rebus shook his head. "When was the last time you saw him?"

Jamphlar checked the notebook. "We haven't seen him this shift. But this morning Cooper and Sneddon watched him go to the corner shop and come back. That was seven-fifteen."

"And you come on at eight?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"There's someone in there," Connaught persisted. "I've seen movement."

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Rebus spoke slowly. "But you haven't seen Ribs Mackay, and I have. He's out on the street, doing whatever he does." He leaned closer to Connaught. "Come on, son, what is it? Been skiving off? Half an hour down the pub, a bit of a thirst-quencher? Catching some kip on the sofa? Looks comfortable, that sofa."

Jamphlar was trying to swallow a mouthful of dough which had become suddenly dry. "We've been doing our job!" he said, spraying crumbs.

Connaught just stared at Rebus with burning eyes. Rebus believed those eyes.

"All right," he conceded, "so there's another explanation. A back exit, a convenient drainpipe."

"The back door's been bricked up," Connaught said stiffly. "There's a drainpipe, but Ribs couldn't manage down it."

"How do you know?"

"I know." Connaught stared out through the curtain.

"Something else then. Maybe he's using a disguise."

Jamphlar, still chewing, flicked through the notebook. "Everyone who comes out and goes in is checked off."

"He's a druggie," said Connaught. "He's not bright enough to fool us."

"Well, son, that's just what he's doing. You're watching an empty flat."

"TV's just come on," said Connaught. Rebus looked out through the curtain. Sure enough, he could see the animated screen. "I hate this programme," Connaught muttered. "I wish he'd change the channel."

"Maybe he can't," said Rebus, making for the door.

He returned to the surveillance that evening, taking someone with him. There'd been a bit of difficulty, getting things arranged. Nobody was keen for him to walk out of the station with Bernie Few. But Rebus would assume full responsibility.

"Damned right you will," said his boss, signing the form.

Jamphlar and Connaught were off, Cooper and Sneddon were on.

"What's this I hear?" Cooper said, opening the door to Rebus and his companion.

"About Ribs?"

"No," said Cooper, "about you bringing the day shift a selection of patisseries."

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"Come and take a look," Sneddon called. Rebus walked over to the window. The light was on in Ribs's living room, and the blinds weren't shut. Ribs had opened the window and was looking down onto the nighttime street, enjoying a cigarette. "See?" Sneddon said.

"I see," said Rebus. Then he turned to Bernie Few. "Come over here, Bernie." Few came shuffling over to the window, and Rebus explained the whole thing to him. Bernie thought about it, rasping a hand over his chin, then asked the same questions Rebus had earlier asked Jamphlar and Connaught. Then he thought about it some more, staring out through the curtain.

"You keep an eye on the second-floor window?" he asked Cooper.

"That's right."

"And the main door?"

"Yes."

"You ever think of looking anywhere else?"

Cooper didn't get it. Neither did Sneddon.

"Go on, Bernie," said Rebus.

"Look at the top floor," Bernie Few suggested. Rebus looked. He saw a cracked and begrimed window, covered with ragged bits of cardboard. "Think anyone lives there?" Bernie asked.

"What are you saying?"

"I think he's done a proper switch on you. Turned the tables, like." He smiled. "You're not watching Ribs Mackay. *He's* watching *you.*"

Rebus nodded, quick to get it. "The change of shifts." Bernie was nodding too. "There's that minute or two when one shift's going off and the other's coming on."

"A window of opportunity," Bernie agreed. "He watches, sees the new shift arrive, and skips downstairs and out the door."

"And twelve hours later," said Rebus, "he waits in the street till he sees the next shift clocking on. Then he nips back in."

Sneddon was shaking his head. "But the lights, the telly . . ."

"Timer switches," Bernie Few answered casually. "You think you see people moving about in there. Maybe you do, but not Ribs. Could just be shadows, a breeze blowing the curtains."

Sneddon frowned. "Who *are* you?"

"An expert witness," Rebus said, patting Bernie Few's shoulder. Then he turned to Sneddon. "I'm going over there. Keep an

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eye on Bernie here. And I *mean* keep an eye on him. As in, don't let him out of your sight."

Sneddon blinked, then stared at Bernie. "You're Buttery Bernie."

Bernie shrugged, accepting the nickname. Rebus was already leaving.

He went to the bar at the street's far corner and ordered a whisky. He sluiced his mouth out with the stuff, so that it would be heavy on his breath, then came out of the bar and weaved his way towards Ribs Mackay's tenement, just another soak trying to find his way home. He tugged his jacket over to one side, and undid a couple of buttons on his shirt. He could do this act. Sometimes he did it too well. He got drunk on the method.

He pushed open the tenement door and was in a dimly lit hallway, with worn stone steps curving up. He grasped the banister and started to climb. He didn't even pause at the second floor, but he could hear music from behind Ribs's door. And he saw that the door was reinforced, just the kind dealers fitted. It gave them those vital extra seconds when the drug squad came calling, sledgehammers and axes their invitations. Seconds were all you needed to flush evidence away, or to swallow it. These days, prior to a house raid, the drugs squad opened up the sewers and had a man stationed there, ready for the flush. . . .

On the top-floor landing, Rebus paused for breath. The door facing him looked hard done by, scarred and chipped and beaten. The nameplate had been hauled off, leaving deep screw holes in the wood. Rebus knocked on the door, ready with excuses and his drunk's head-down stance. He waited, but there was no answer. He listened, then put his eyes to the letterbox. Darkness. He tried the door handle. It turned, and the door swung inwards. When he thought about it, an unlocked door made sense. Ribs would need to come and go in a hurry, and locks took time.

Rebus stepped quietly into the short hallway. Some of the interior doors were open, bringing with them chinks of streetlight. The place smelt musty and damp, and it was cold. There was no furniture, and the wallpaper had peeled from the walls. Long strips now lay in wrinkled piles, like an old woman's stockings come to rest at her ankles. Rebus walked on tiptoe. He didn't know how good the floors were, and he didn't want anyone below to hear him. He didn't want Ribs Mackay to hear him.

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He went into the living room. It was identical in shape to the surveillance living room. There were newspapers on the floor, a carpet rolled up against one wall. Tufts of carpet lay scattered across the floor. Mice had obviously been taking bits for nesting. Rebus went to the window. There was a small gap where two pieces of cardboard didn't quite meet. Through this gap he had a good view of the surveillance flat. And though the lights were off, the streetlight illuminated the net curtain, so that anyone behind the curtain who moved became a shadow puppet. Someone, Sneddon or Cooper or Bernie Few, was moving just now.

"You clever little runt," Rebus whispered. Then he picked something up off the floor. It was a single-lens reflex camera, with telephoto lens attached. Not the sort of thing you found lying in abandoned flats. He picked it up and focussed on the window across the street. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind now. It was so simple. Ribs sneaked up here, watched the surveillance through the telephoto while they thought they were watching him, and at eight o'clock walked smartly out of the tenement and went about his business.

"You're as good as gold, Bernie," said Rebus. Then he put the camera back just the way he'd found it and tiptoed back through the flat.

"Where is he?"

Stupid question, considering. Sneddon just shrugged. "He had to use the bathroom."

"Of course he did," said Rebus.

Sneddon led him through to the bathroom. It had a small window high on one wall. The window was open. It led not to the outside, but merely back into the hall near the flat's stairwell door.

"He was in here awhile, so I came looking. Banged on the door, no answer, managed to force the thing open, but he wasn't here." Sneddon's face and neck were red with embarrassment; or maybe it was just the exercise. "I ran downstairs, but there was no sign of him."

"I don't believe he could have squeezed out of that window," Rebus said sceptically. "Not even Bernie Few." The window was about twelve inches by nine. It could be reached by standing on the rim of the bath, but the walls were white tile, and Rebus couldn't see any signs of scuff marks. He looked at the toilet. Its

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lid was down, but didn't sit level with the pan. Rebus lifted the lid and found himself staring at towels, several of them, stuffed down into the pan.

"What the . . . ?" Sneddon couldn't believe his eyes. But Rebus could. He opened the small airing cupboard beneath the sink. It was empty. A shelf had been lifted out and placed upright in the back of the cupboard. There was just about room inside to make for a hiding place. Rebus smiled at the disbelieving Sneddon.

"He waited till you'd gone downstairs."

"Then what?" said Sneddon. "You mean he's still in the flat?"

Rebus wondered. "No," he said at last, shaking his head. "But think of what he just told us, about how Ribs was tricking us."

He led Sneddon out of the flat, but instead of heading down, he climbed up a further flight to the top floor. Set into the ceiling was a skylight, and it too was open.

"A walk across the rooftops," said Rebus.

Sneddon just shook his head. "Sorry, sir," he offered.

"Never mind," said Rebus, knowing, however, that his boss would.

At seven next morning, Ribs Mackay left his flat and walked jauntily to the corner shop, followed by Sneddon. Then he walked back again, enjoying a cigarette, not a care in the world. He'd shown himself to the surveillance team, and now they had something to tell the new shift, something to occupy them during the changeover.

As usual, the changeover happened at eight. And exactly a minute after Jamphlar and Connaught entered the tenement, the door across the street opened and Ribs Mackay flew out.

Rebus and Sneddon, snug in Rebus's car, watched him go. Then Sneddon got out to follow him. He didn't look back at Rebus, but he did wave an acknowledgment that his superior had been right. Rebus hoped Sneddon was better as a tail than he was as a watcher. He hoped they'd catch Ribs with the stuff on him, dealing it out perhaps, or taking delivery from his own supplier. That was the plan. That had been the plan throughout.

He started the ignition and drove out onto Buccleuch Street. Scott's Bar was an early opener, and John Rebus had an appointment there.

He owed Bernie Few a drink. ●

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Art by Darryl Elliott

DOUBLE TAKE

by L. J. Washburn

The voice on the other end of the phone was frantic enough to make Hallam forget for a moment the other things on his mind. "You've got to help me, Lucas," it said. "I've got a movie half in the can, and I can't go on without Allen!"

"Take it easy, Cal," Hallam drawled. "Just slow down and tell me what happened." He covered the mouthpiece of the phone with his right hand and hissed, "Beth! Get down from there right now, you little—"

"I don't *know* what happened," Calvin Forrester said into Hallam's left ear. "All I know is that Allen didn't show up for this morning's shooting, and now the schedule's ruined!"

The producer was an excitable sort, Hallam knew, and it would probably take awhile to drag a coherent story out of him. Hallam wouldn't be able to concentrate on that while he was worrying about his daughter breaking her fool neck, so he put

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the sternest expression possible on his craggy, gray-moustached face and pointed down at the floor. The redheaded five-year-old, who had somehow managed to stack three chairs on top of each other in the middle of the apartment's living room, looked disappointed as she perched on top of the swaying, makeshift tower. She began to climb down, however, and Hallam stood tensely beside the phone table, ready to leap and catch her if she fell.

He wondered where in blazes Beth had gotten the idea that it was all right to take such damn-fool chances.

"Settle down, Cal," he went on into the phone. "From what I hear about the feller, it ain't unusual for Hathaway to show up late for work."

Elements of the crime story, the Western, and the historical mystery combine in L. J. Washburn's series about private eye Lucas Hallam and the world of silent and early talking movies. Hallam debuted in an anthology by the Private Eye Writers of America. His creator, a resident of Azle, Texas, has a keen understanding of the cowboys who performed stunt work in the early Westerns and has managed to create a character who is tough, humane, and savvy all at once. ¶

The producer heaved a sigh. "You're right, you're right. He's undependable, even more so than actors usually are. Everybody in Hollywood knows that. If his pictures didn't make so damned much money, nobody would put up with him. But I'm still stuck with him."

"You call his place?" As he asked the question, Hallam nodded at Beth, who had reached the floor safely. She reached up and grabbed the top chair, obviously intending to try to take it down. Hallam shook his head and motioned curtly with his hand, telling her to leave the chairs alone. He jerked a thumb toward the arched entrance that led out of the living room and into the combination dining room and kitchen. Beth pouted, but she went.

"First thing," Forrester replied. "There was no answer. I kept trying to call. Nothing. So I sent one of the gofers over there to check on him. Allen's got a temper, you know, so I didn't want

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to bother him myself if he was just too drunk to answer the phone or involved with, ah, a young lady. . . ."

"What'd the feller find, Cal?"

"Allen didn't come to the door, so the boy used the key I gave him. He said the place looked like there had been a fight. Chairs turned over, things scattered around, stuff like that. I don't mind telling you, Lucas, when I heard that a chill went right down my back. Something's happened to Allen. I'm sure of it."

Hallam was inclined to take the matter a mite more seriously now himself. Allen Hathaway was a star, and as such he had money. He was also very important to the studio he worked for, especially with his current picture only half completed. Those things made him an attractive target for kidnappers.

Or maybe, knowing Hathaway, he had wrecked the place himself during a drunken rampage, then gone out to continue his bender. Either way, Hallam could understand Calvin Forrester's concern. He said, "Have you called the cops?"

"Allen hasn't been missing long enough to interest them, and there were no real signs of foul play at his apartment, no bloodstains or anything like that. Besides, I'd rather keep this quiet if I can."

That was typical; the studios covered up everything they could about their stars that might be the least bit unflattering. Hallam understood how the system worked, whether he agreed with it or not.

"All right," he said into the phone. "I'll look into it for you. If Hathaway's been snatched, is the studio willing to pay to get him back?"

"God, yes! Anything reasonable. We've got too much money tied up in him and his pictures not to."

"I'll give you a call or stop by the studio later in the day to let you know what I've found out. Try to take it easy, Cal. It ain't goin' to help nothing for you to pop a blood vessel."

"I'll try. Thank you, Lucas. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Don't thank me yet. I ain't done nothin'. So long, Cal."

He hung the earpiece in its cradle, then looked around for Beth. She hadn't come back from the kitchen. Hallam started in that direction, but he had only taken a couple of steps when he heard the crash. Something had shattered in there, but Beth wasn't howling, so it was likely she was unhurt. Hallam sighed.

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Finding a vanished movie star might be difficult, or it might not. But he knew an even more formidable task was in front of him.

He had to find somebody willing to babysit the little hellion.

"No, no, no!" Mrs. Martinez said vehemently. "The last time you left her here, she like to scare me out of five years of my life. And those are five years I cannot spare, Señor Hallam!"

"I promise Beth won't climb out on that balcony railin' again," Hallam said, his expression solemn. He had Beth's left hand held tightly in his right, her little fist swallowed up by his massive palm.

Mrs. Martinez lived right down the hall in the Fountain Avenue apartment house, and she was the handiest babysitter Hallam knew. But she'd had her fill of Beth's mischief, and Hallam couldn't blame her for that. He had trouble keeping up with the little girl himself, and he was her father.

That concept still threw him for a loop if he thought about it too much. He hadn't even known he had a daughter, probably never would have known if Liz Fletcher, Beth's mother, hadn't died suddenly a few years earlier. Hallam and Liz had been together for a while—long enough for Beth to get started—and then Liz had left, feeling that there wasn't enough room in Hallam's life for her.

It was true that Hallam stayed busy. He had his one-man private detective agency, as well as his work as a riding extra and occasional stuntman in the herd of B Westerns that came stampeding out of Gower Gulch every year. The advent of sound had slowed down production of Westerns for a while, since it was difficult to hide the microphones during all the location shooting Western pictures required, but as always, the movie crews had come up with ways to get around the problem. Now, a couple of years into the sound era, Westerns were as popular as ever, which meant Hallam had all the work he could want.

He'd started turning some of it away, however, since Liz's sister had showed up during the middle of a particularly worrisome case and shoved a redheaded, squalling little bundle into his arms and informed him that he was responsible for it. Yep, having a daughter had changed his life a whole heap, Hallam reflected, but he wouldn't go back to the way it had been before. No sir.

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"You promise she won't do nothin' crazy?" Mrs. Martinez asked dubiously.

"You got my word on it," Hallam assured her. He looked down at Beth and said firmly, "No gags while you're stayin' with Mrs. Martinez, you got it?"

"Got it," Beth muttered unhappily.

"Okay," Mrs. Martinez said, but her attitude made it clear she would believe Beth could behave only when she saw it with her own eyes. She stepped back and Beth went into the apartment carrying the stuffed horse she had brought from home. She sat down cross-legged in the middle of the living-room floor.

"All right, now, you be good, hear?" Hallam said as he stepped over to her and reached down to stroke her short red hair. "Mind Mrs. Martinez, and I'll be back in a while."

"Sure," Beth said without looking up. She began to move the toy horse across the floor as if it were galloping, then she pressed its front legs down suddenly and made it tumble head over heels. "Running W!" she exclaimed.

Hallam just sighed and turned around in time to see Mrs. Martinez rolling her eyes heavenward. He smiled weakly and got out of there while he still could.

His first stop was the studio, where he picked up a key to Allen Hathaway's bungalow apartment. A very worried Calvin Forrester told him Hathaway still hadn't shown up at the studio. Hallam hadn't really expected that he would have. Hathaway was either off on a toot—or he really had been kidnapped.

There was another possibility, Hallam realized after he had paid a visit to Hathaway's place and found it just as Forrester had described it: disheveled, but with no sign of real violence. Something bad, but purely accidental, could have happened to the actor. People died in Southern California every day, and they weren't all murders. It just sometimes *seemed* that way. Hallam headed for downtown Los Angeles and the L.A. county morgue.

"Unidentified bodies?" the attendant on duty, who knew Hallam slightly, said in response to a question from the big detective. "Sure we got 'em. What kind you want?"

The fellow sounded entirely too cheerful for his job, Hallam thought, but he supposed you got used to being around dead folks. Hallam himself never had, though.

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"Male, about thirty years old," Hallam said. "Dark hair, well built, handsome . . . or at least he started out that way. If something fatal happened to him, ain't no tellin' what he looks like now."

"Sounds familiar. This gink you're looking for got a name?" asked the attendant.

Hallam hesitated. He knew Forrester didn't want publicity; that was one of the reasons the producer hadn't called the cops in the first place. For the time being, Hallam figured he ought to keep the missing man's identity under the broad-brimmed Stetson he wore.

"Ain't at liberty to say."

The attendant frowned. "If you can identify one of these John Does we got here, you got to do it. It's the law."

"If the feller's who I'm lookin' for, I'll tell you," Hallam said. "You got my word on it."

"Well, I suppose that's good enough for me. Come on."

Hallam followed the man into the depths of the building, feeling a chill that had little or nothing to do with the actual temperature growing inside him with every step. The attendant led him into a large room with rows of doors stacked one above the other on both walls, and Hallam knew that behind many of those doors rested the bodies of people who had met their Maker in all the varied ways that universal passage was possible. He supposed that somebody like him, who had seen more than sixty years come and go, ought to be more comfortable with the idea of death. He had never come around to that point, though.

"Here we go," the attendant said as he consulted a piece of paper in his hand and then paused in front of one of the square doors. He took hold of its handle and slid out the drawer behind it. A long, white-shrouded figure lay on the table. Carefully, the attendant folded back the sheet. "This the guy? He's the only unidentified body I've got that fits the description you gave me."

The corpse didn't fit all of that description, Hallam thought. Nobody would ever consider those bloated features handsome. But the approximate age and the hair color were right, and Hallam could tell from the shape of the body under the sheet that this man and Allen Hathaway had been about the same size. "Could be," Hallam said grimly. "What happened to him?"

The attendant consulted the paper in his hand again. "Drowned. But the M.E. says he also got quite a bump on the

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back of the head. Looks like somebody clouted him and then dumped him in the ocean. That makes it murder."

Hallam's jaw was a tight line as he looked down at the corpse. Although he didn't know the why of it, he was about halfway convinced the dead man was indeed Allen Hathaway. But . . .

"How long was he in the water?"

"You'd have to ask the M.E. about that. I'd guess a day or two anyway, long enough for the fish to get at him a little. What about it, Lucas? You know this guy?"

"Maybe. But first I've got to use your phone."

"Oh no. Allen was here yesterday," Forrester said. "As uncooperative with the director as usual, but definitely here."

"Then he didn't float up on the beach this morning, because the feller I just took a gander at had been in the water longer'n that. Sorry, Cal. I sure thought for a minute I'd found him. This gent here in the morgue could pass for Hathaway without a lick of trouble."

"Oh my God." Hallam heard the stunned realization in Forrester's voice. The producer went on, "You say that man looks just like Allen?"

"Well, not like they was twins or anything, but from a distance, or if you just looked at this feller quick-like—" Hallam stopped, and his fingers tightened on the earpiece of the phone. "Aw, hell. Has Hathaway got a stunt double?"

"Of course he does. His name is Lonnie Vinson. But he hasn't been here on the lot for several days. We already shot all the gags for this picture. Lucas, you don't think the man in the morgue could be . . ."

"I reckon we'd better find out," Hallam said.

Hallam knew many of the stuntmen working in Hollywood, but not all of them. He had never met Lonnie Vinson. But once he had gone upstairs from the morgue to police headquarters and talked to a pair of homicide detectives—still keeping Allen Hathaway's name out of the conversation—it didn't take long for the cops to come up with somebody to identify the body. Hallam stood to one side of the door to the morgue as the detectives led a weeping young woman out of the place and took her up to their office to make a statement.

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The attendant who had shown Hallam the body sauntered up, chewing gum now, which was something else Hallam couldn't understand. "That's the girlfriend," the attendant said, nodding toward the back of the sobbing woman. "Vinson didn't have any family out here; he's from back in Iowa or someplace like that. But she identified him, all right. I heard her tellin' those homicide bulls that it was him."

"She have any idea what happened to him?"

The attendant shrugged. "Who knows? That ain't my department."

Maybe not, Hallam thought, but it was his. Could be it was just coincidence that Allen Hathaway had vanished and his stunt double, Lonnie Vinson, had turned up dead on the same day. Could be . . . but Hallam didn't think so.

He put in another call to the studio to let Calvin Forrester know that the dead man was indeed Lonnie Vinson. It was a little past noon, but Hallam wasn't hungry. The past hour had taken care of his appetite for a while. He was waiting on the steps outside City Hall, where the police department and the morgue were located, when the young woman with blond hair and red, swollen eyes emerged.

"Ma'am?" he said, stepping up to her and taking off his hat. "My name's Lucas Hallam, and I'm mighty sorry about your loss."

She looked up at him, blinking in surprise, obviously wondering why this big, rugged-looking cowboy was talking to her. Then the confusion drained out of her eyes along with another tear or two, and she nodded. "You're the man who told the police that . . . that it might be Lonnie down there in the . . . in the . . ."

"Yes, ma'am," Hallam said.

"You . . . Did you know Lonnie?"

"No, ma'am. I do some stunt work, too, but we never ran into each other. The reason I happened to be here is that I'm a private detective, and I'm workin' on a case that, well, that Lonnie's death might have something to do with."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand at all."

Hallam decided to tell her the truth. "You know who Allen Hathaway is?"

"Of course, the movie star. Lonnie is . . . was his stunt double."

"Well, Hathaway's missin', and I got to thinkin', what if somebody was after him, meanin' to grab him for ransom or something, and they made a mistake . . ."

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The young woman put her hand to her mouth. "You think they might have mistaken Lonnie for Allen Hathaway?"

"That's what a double is for. And when they figured out they'd snatched the wrong feller—"

"They killed him and threw him in the ocean," she finished for him. A low moan came from her lips. "Oh God! Lonnie may have died because he looked like Allen Hathaway!"

"It's a possibility," Hallam told her. "Unless you know something that says otherwise. That's why I figured I'd better talk to you. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I . . . Of course, Mr. . . . Hallam, was it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Lucas Hallam."

"I'm Marjorie Grant."

"There's a lunch counter right down the street."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly eat. But I think I could manage a cup of coffee, Mr. Hallam. Are . . . are you going to try to find out who killed Lonnie?"

"If I do, it might lead me to whoever's got Hathaway, so I reckon I'll do my best."

"Then I definitely want to talk to you. I want whoever did this awful thing caught and punished."

There was an unexpected ferocity in her voice. Marjorie Grant, Hallam thought, was probably not a good woman to cross.

"The man's name is Arnold Moss. I distinctly remember Lonnie telling me about him." Marjorie Grant looked at Hallam over her cup of coffee, then sipped some of the strong black brew.

"The name's familiar," Hallam said with a nod. "He's a gambler, I think. Pretty shady character. You're sure of what your friend Lonnie said about him?"

"I'm certain. Mr. Hathaway had told Lonnie all about it. They were sort of friends, you know, not in any close way, but because they shared so much. Playing the same characters on screen and all."

Hallam nodded. Some stars were indeed friendly with their stunt doubles, knowing that the doubles kept them from having to perform any dangerous gags. Others, as if wanting to maintain in their own minds the illusion that was created on the screen, had nothing to do with the stuntmen who passed for them.

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"Lonnie said that Mr. Hathaway owed a lot of money to Arnold Moss because of some bets he lost. Mr. Hathaway didn't want to pay, even though he could afford to, and Moss threatened to get the money one way or another."

That way could be by holding up the studio for ransom, Hallam thought. And if Moss had snatched Lonnie Vinson by mistake, thinking he was Hathaway . . .

"Reckon I'll have to look up this feller Moss and have a talk with him," Hallam said quietly.

Marjorie gave him a solemn nod. "I think that would be a good idea. You might be able to save Mr. Hathaway, even if Lonnie is already . . . already *dead.*" Her voice broke a little, and she set her cup back in its saucer with a rattle of china. Fresh tears welled from her eyes. She rested her elbows on the Formica-topped diner table between her and Hallam and put her hands over her face as she sobbed.

Hallam glanced around uncomfortably. None of the other customers in the busy lunch counter seemed to be paying any attention to Marjorie's quiet crying, and he was glad of that. He said, "If Moss is responsible for Lonnie's death, I'll see that he pays for it, ma'am. You got my word on that."

She sniffled a few more times, wiped her nose on the back of her hand, and summoned up a feeble smile. "I believe you, Mr. Hallam. You . . . you seem to be the kind of man who does what he says he's going to do."

"Yes, ma'am. Right now, I'm going to see if I can find Moss." He hesitated, then asked one more time, "You're sure Lonnie was tellin' you the straight of it?"

"I'm positive. There were no secrets between us." Her smile grew a little stronger with the memory. "You see, we were going to be married next month. Lonnie would never have lied to me."

It had been Hallam's experience that anybody would lie about just about anything, if they had a good enough motive, but he couldn't see any reason for Lonnie Vinson to lie about Allen Hathaway being threatened by Moss. For one thing, Hallam knew from what he had heard around town that Arnold Moss was not only a gambler, but he was pretty ruthless about collecting when someone tried to welsh on him. For another, he had also heard rumors about Hathaway's gambling. There had been enough gossip to make Hallam believe that the actor was capable of running up a big debt, then refusing to pay it. Hathaway

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had always been arrogant, thinking himself above the rules.

Maybe he had found out the hard way that some people took rules mighty seriously.

Hallam drove south through Inglewood to Hollywood Park. He didn't follow horse racing that closely, but a glance at a newspaper had told him the ponies were running today, and that would be the most likely place to either find Arnold Moss or get a lead on him.

The horses were just coming to the post for the second race when Hallam strolled along the sun-splashed gallery next to the track. The grandstand lifted to his right, row after row of benches filled with spectators. Someone called his name, and he turned to wave at a grinning Buck Jones, an acquaintance from the studios who was most likely between pictures since he was at the track in the middle of the afternoon. Hallam saw other people he knew from the studios, mostly front-office types. He didn't pause to chew the fat with anyone, however, since he was here on business.

After a few minutes, he spotted the man he was looking for, a small, flashily dressed gent who called himself Hopper. As far as Hallam was concerned, Hopper spent way too much time reading stories by some New York sports writer named Runyon, because he had it in his head that he ought to dress and act like all the racetrack touts in those yarns. But Hopper knew just about everybody who bet on horse races in this town, and Hallam intended to pick his brain.

"Howdy, Hopper," he said as he came up to the man.

"Hallam!" exclaimed Hopper. "I didn't know you played the nags. Hey, I got a tip for you, Buffalo Gal in the fifth race. She can't lose!"

"Much obliged, but I reckon I already lost enough money over the years."

"But this isn't even a bet, Hallam! It's a sure thing! Would I steer you wrong?"

"I hope not," Hallam said. "I'm lookin' for Arnold Moss."

Instantly, a frown appeared on the tout's face. "What do you want with Moss? There's plenty of other guys who'll take your action. You don't want to mess with Moss these days."

"Oh? Why's that?"

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Hopper glanced around apprehensively. "It ain't always safe to talk, you know, even with all this noise around. Somebody could overhear. . . ."

Hallam let him see the corner of the sawbuck in his hand, and it disappeared smoother than Houdini.

"But I'm always glad to do a favor for an old friend," Hopper went on without missing a beat. "Word around the track has it that Moss is really on edge, like he's got something going that's making him nervous. I wouldn't deal with him if I was you."

"Is he here?" Hallam asked.

"Oh yeah, he's here, all right. I seen him down by the paddock a little while ago. Hey, they're at the post!" Hopper held up the tenspot Hallam had just given him. "I got to get a bet down!"

With that he scurried away, and Hallam let him go. He had found out what he wanted to know. A moment later the bell rang and a full-throated roar went up from the crowd as the horses burst away from the post. Hallam hoped Hopper had had time to place that bet.

So, Hallam thought as he made his way through the crowd toward the paddock, Arnold Moss was jumpy about something, was he? Kidnapping a movie star and holding him for ransom was enough to make anybody nervous. Hallam might have enough right now to go to the cops and let them deal with Moss. They could sweat the gambler, get the truth about Hathaway—and Lonnie Vinson's murder—out of him.

But Hallam preferred to talk to Moss himself. He wanted some real proof, so that the cops wouldn't have to beat a confession out of the gambler.

Hallam didn't really notice the noise from the crowd swelling even more as the race neared its conclusion. Seeing which horse could run around in a circle the fastest didn't interest him. During the days when he had still been cowboying, before he'd pinned on first a Texas Ranger's badge and then a Pinkerton's shield, he had been to plenty of races, although he had never ridden in one because he was too big. Back then, at every county fair, the local cowboys had gotten together to see who had the fastest pony. *Those* races meant something. Hallam couldn't get too excited about this modern kind.

He circled the grandstand and approached the paddock. The stables were beyond the fence enclosure where quite a few horses were currently being saddled for the next race. Several

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men leaned on the fence. Hallam looked them over, didn't recognize any of them as Arnold Moss. The gambler had been pointed out to him in various speakeasies, and Hallam was confident he would recognize the man.

He nodded to one of the gents watching the horses and asked, "Arnold Moss around?"

The man jerked his chin toward the stables. "Saw him going that way just a little while ago."

"Thanks," Hallam said. He frowned a little as he started toward the stables. Technically, nobody was supposed to be back there except owners, trainers, jockeys, exercise boys, and people who worked for the track. Other folks, especially gamblers, weren't supposed to be that close to the horses. But Hallam supposed that money could get a feller around those rules, too.

He was close enough to the stables to smell the familiar blend of odors that was common to any barn when a man sauntered out coming in his direction. The man wore an expensive suit, a Panama hat, and the kind of Italian shoes that would make anybody think twice about wearing them into a stable. Evidently Arnold Moss had been careful about where he stepped, though, because his shoes were still clean and brightly polished. He had a hand-rolled cigarette in the corner of his mouth. His eyes, set deeply in his narrow face, flicked over Hallam without recognition or interest.

Hallam recognized him, though, and Moss had no choice but to stop when Hallam stepped in front of him. "Howdy, Moss," Hallam said.

The gambler glared at him, irritated at being stopped. "Do I know you, cowboy?"

"I don't reckon you do. But I know you, Moss." Hallam decided to go ahead and prod the man to see what would happen. "I know all about that bad debt and what you intend to do to collect on it, too."

Moss's eyes widened, and he breathed, "Son of a bitch!" Despite all the people around, his hand moved instinctively under his coat as he reached for a gun. Hallam's left hand darted out, clamped on Moss's wrist, and squeezed. Moss let out a squeak of pain and hunched over. Hallam had been ready for just such a reaction when he confronted Moss.

He wasn't ready for the two men who came out of the barn behind Moss and charged toward him when the gambler yelped, "Get this guy!"

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Both of the newcomers were big and ugly, just the type that a gambler like Moss would have hanging around to take care of any rough stuff. As they came toward him, Hallam shoved Moss at them as hard as he could. Moss went backward, arms windmilling as he yelled. One of the bruisers managed to avoid him, but he crashed into the other one, getting their feet tangled up. Moss and the flunky went down.

The other man swung a roundhouse punch that Hallam saw coming a mile away. He ducked under the blow, stepped in, and hooked a hard right into the man's midsection. It felt almost like punching a washboard, but Hallam saw a tiny flash of pain in the man's eyes. Hallam's hand hurt, that was for sure. And he had made the mistake of getting inside the circle of the man's arms.

Those arms locked around Hallam in a brutal bear hug, making his ribs creak. Hallam brought his knee up into his opponent's groin, and that caused more than a flash of pain. The man's eyes widened and he groaned. His grip slipped a little, enough for Hallam to get one hand loose and slam his fist into the man's jaw. That rocked him a little more, and Hallam was able to tear himself free. Now that he had some room, he swung two more punches, a left and a right that jerked the bruiser's head back and forth. The gent's jaw might not be glass, but it was more fragile than his stomach. His eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped to his knees.

The other man was on his feet by now. Hallam heard him coming, twisted aside, and stuck out a booted foot. The man tripped over it and fell, and on the way to the dirt in front of the stable, Hallam brought his clubbed fists down hard on the back of his neck. The man groaned once, tried to push himself back up, then slumped down again.

Hallam was breathing hard. These boys were pretty tough, he thought, but they hadn't ever broken up a fight in a saloon and then had to take on both bunches of cowboys who had started the brawl. Hallam had.

He turned toward Arnold Moss in time to see the gambler scrambling back to his feet, a little nickel-plated pistol in his hand. Hallam muttered, "Oh, hell," then took one long stride that brought him within reach of Moss. The gambler was still lifting the gun when Hallam backhanded him, knocking him off his feet. The gun skittered away.

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Moss propped himself up on an elbow and put his other hand to his bloody mouth. "You didn't have to do that!" he said through lips that were puffing up. "You didn't have to stick your nose in! Nobody would've gotten hurt!"

"What about Lonnie Vinson?" Hallam demanded. "And for all I know, you planned to kill Hathaway, too, once you'd collected the ransom on him."

A sizeable crowd had gathered, drawn by the brief fight, and one man said, "Holy cow! The big galoot's talking about murder and kidnapping. I'm getting the cops!"

Hallam glanced over his shoulder. Several of the racetrack's guards were already on their way to check out the commotion, he saw. He turned back to Moss and said, "Talk fast, mister. Where are you holdin' Hathaway?"

Moss just stared at him for a few seconds as blood continued to drip from his lips. Finally, he said frantically, "What the *hell* are you talking about? Who's Lonnie Vinson? And if you're talking about Allen Hathaway, I don't want anything more to do with that damned welsher!"

"Yeah, you just stick with that story," Hallam advised him grimly. "I reckon the cops'll enjoy gettin' the truth out of you."

"Look," Moss said desperately as he sat up. "I don't know anybody named Vinson, and I sure didn't kill or kidnap anybody!"

He looked and sounded like he was telling the truth, Hallam thought. "What about the money Hathaway owes you?"

"Hell, everybody gets stuck with some bad debts now and then. I don't like it, but I wouldn't kill anybody over it, no matter what you've heard."

"Then why'd you try to pull a gun on me?"

"Because I thought you knew about—" Moss fell silent abruptly.

Hallam stepped closer to him, looming over him. "Knew about what?"

Moss muttered a few more curses, then said, "I got the fix in on the sixth race. The favorite's been doped. The trainer played ball with me because he's into me for ten grand. But if you're going to start throwing charges around like murder and kidnapping, I'll admit to the fix. I don't want any cops trying to sweat a confession out of me for something I didn't do."

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Moss could still be lying, of course, but Hallam didn't think so. The words had the ring of truth. Hallam said, "You haven't seen Hathaway last night or today?"

"I haven't seen him in a week, I swear to God. I don't want to see him!"

Hallam took a deep breath, let it out in a long sigh. He believed Moss.

And that left him right back where he had started.

A phone call to the studio from the track offices after the business with Moss had been cleaned up told Hallam that not only had Allen Hathaway not put in an appearance, but there had been no ransom demand of any kind, either.

"Maybe the kidnappers are just trying to draw things out and make us more eager to pay once they get in touch with us," Calvin Forrester suggested.

"If Hathaway was kidnapped at all," Hallam muttered. "He still could have gone off on his own."

"Oh Lord. What are we going to do, Lucas?"

"I'll do some more lookin' around," Hallam promised. "Don't give up yet."

But that was just about what Hallam was ready to do a couple of hours later. He had checked the railroad station and the bus terminal—although he couldn't imagine a star of Hathaway's magnitude slipping out of town on a bus—with no luck. Hathaway could have disguised himself, of course. No ships had sailed today, so Hathaway hadn't left Los Angeles that way. Hallam knew most of the speakeasies in town and was acquainted with the bartenders. None of them had seen Hathaway, and Hallam checked from the swankiest private club to the dingiest hole-in-the-wall dive. Hathaway had been known to frequent all of them when he was drinking.

But now he seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth.

The last place Hallam stopped was the Waterhole, the speak where the cowboy stuntmen and riding extras spent their days when they weren't working. It was unlikely that an urbane movie star like Hathaway would have let himself be caught dead in a place like the Waterhole, surrounded by cowboys, but Hallam was getting desperate. Besides, he had an appetite now, and he intended to visit the free-lunch counter and wash down

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some hardboiled eggs and ham and pickles with a mug of cold beer. It had been a long, frustrating day.

Several of his friends called him over to a table. Hallam sat down and returned their greetings. The young man called Pecos, who was as daredevil a rider as Hallam had ever seen, grinned and said, "You look like you been rode hard and put up wet, Lucas. Working on a case?"

Hallam nodded. "Yep. Any of you boys know a feller named Lonnie Vinson?"

Several of the men nodded, including Pecos. "Sure, I knew Lonnie," the young man said. "Heard he got himself killed. Damn shame. You tryin' to find out who did him in, Lucas?"

"That's right. I made a promise to a pretty little gal who got her heart broke earlier today."

Pecos frowned. "I didn't know Lonnie had a sister."

"Not his sister. His fiancée. Gal name of Marjorie Grant."

"Somebody's told you wrong, Lucas," Pecos said, shaking his head. "I met Marjorie a few times. Pretty little nurse who works over at the county hospital. But Lonnie broke up with her two weeks ago. He never asked her to marry him. Shoot, *she* was the one who wanted to get married, but Lonnie, he wanted to stay footloose and fancy-free."

Hallam stared across the table at Pecos. "You sure about that?"

"You bet. Lonnie himself told me about it. Said Marjorie took it awful hard when he told her it was over. She even kept calling him later, he said, wanting to get together and see if they could patch things up."

The beer and the free food were forgotten. Hallam sat there in silence for a long moment, then said slowly and quietly, "Well, hell . . ."

Dusk was settling down by the time Hallam found Marjorie Grant's house, a cottage in Glendale that she rented. It had taken Hallam more time than he liked to think about to find out where she lived, since the woman in the office at the county hospital hadn't wanted to give him the address. He had finally persuaded her that it was a matter of life and death.

Maybe not for Allen Hathaway, Hallam thought as he approached the house—but Lonnie Vinson was sure enough dead.

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And Hathaway might be sooner or later, when things didn't work out to suit Marjorie.

He circled the cottage, hoping to discover where she was keeping Hathaway before he went busting in. The shadows outside were thick enough now to conceal him. He found a kitchen window at the rear of the house. Hearing someone humming inside, he took off his hat and decided to risk a glance.

Marjorie was coming out of a narrow door on the other side of the room. She turned quickly, as soon as she was through the door, and shut it behind her. Hallam heard a lock click into place. A faint smile tugged at his mouth. Sometimes a feller got lucky, and he was overdue. He moved clear of the window, straightened, and went to the back door.

Marjorie answered his soft knock almost immediately. "Mr. Hallam!" she said, obviously surprised to see him. "Did you . . . did you find out what happened to Lonnie?"

"As a matter of fact, I sure did," he told her. "Reckon I could come in and tell you about it?"

"Of course. Please, come in." She stepped back. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"That'd be fine." Hallam put his hat on the kitchen table and sat down.

While she fussed with the coffee, she said, "Was . . . was it that awful man Moss? Was it like you thought, he meant to kidnap Mr. Hathaway but got my Lonnie by mistake?"

"Well, Moss is mixed up in plenty of crooked stuff, but he ain't to blame for what happened to your feller."

"My fiancé," Marjorie said as she turned away from the stove and put a cup of coffee on the table beside Hallam. "Remember, Lonnie and I were going to get married. There you are, drink up."

"In a minute," Hallam said, pushing the cup aside. "First I want to tell you what happened to Lonnie."

"All right." She sat down in one of the other chairs at the kitchen table. "Go ahead."

"Somebody called him and talked him into meetin' 'em," Hallam said. "Probably down by the ocean somewhere. They had an argument, and I reckon Lonnie must've made the mistake of turnin' his back on this person, 'cause he got hit on the head hard enough to knock him out. Then the one who'd called him and got him to come there shoved him into the water, and he

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drowned." Hallam shook his head. "Lonnie never should've turned his back. But I reckon he still trusted her, even though he shouldn't have."

Marjorie's face was still placid, but her voice was brittle as she said, "Her?"

"You, Marjorie," Hallam said quietly. "You killed Lonnie because he wouldn't marry you. Then, since you couldn't have him, you went out and got the next best thing. You kidnapped Allen Hathaway."

"That's utterly insane," Marjorie murmured. "How could I kidnap someone like Allen Hathaway, a big strong movie star like that?"

"By shootin' him with a hypo full of the stuff you stole from the hospital where you work, the same stuff that's likely in that coffee you just fixed me." Hallam pointed at the cup with his thumb. "Did you plan to stash me in the basement, too?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Marjorie told him calmly. "I never heard of such a thing. You think I have a movie star in my basement?"

"Yes, ma'am." Hallam pushed himself to his feet. "And if you don't mind, I reckon I'll go have me a look on the other side of that door."

He took a step toward the locked door and she came at him, exploding up from the chair and bringing up the knife she had hidden in the folds of her dress in case the knockout drops in the coffee didn't work. Hallam twisted toward her, saw the blade coming at him, and blocked her arm with his. All he meant to do was keep her from stabbing him, but he must have hit her harder than he had intended. He heard the bone in her forearm snap, and she gave a thin little scream as she dropped the knife. Hallam kicked it away. Marjorie fell to her knees, clutching her broken arm against her body.

"Leave him alone," she said, her voice ragged. "He's not the man you're looking for. He's not Allen Hathaway. He's Lonnie. He's Lonnie, and he's going to marry me. He swore he would, and now he's going to do it. He's Lonnie, I tell you. He looks just *like* Lonnie."

Hallam didn't bother asking her for the key to the basement door. He just kicked it open and looked down the steps. The light from the kitchen fell in a long rectangle that showed him the man lying on the cement floor, hands tied behind him. The man

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looked up at Hallam, blinking against the light. His voice was thick with the drug as he said, "Who . . . what . . . what am I . . . doing here?"

"Doublin'," Hallam told Allen Hathaway. "Doublin' for Lonnie Vinson."

Hallam almost felt cheerful as he walked down the hallway toward Mrs. Martinez's apartment. Allen Hathaway was in the hospital and would be all right in time, and Hallam had a check from a very grateful Calvin Forrester in his pocket.

But Marjorie Grant was also in the hospital, under a police guard, and while her broken arm would heal, she would never really be all right again. And Lonnie Vinson was still in the morgue. Those were reasons enough for Hallam not to feel too good about how everything had worked out.

On the other hand, Arnold Moss's little race-fixing scheme had been exposed, too, so that was a little more to be considered on the good side, even though it had only happened because Marjorie wanted to divert suspicion from herself by steering Hallam to Moss.

Hallam knocked on the door of the apartment, and it was jerked open almost before his knuckles bounced off the wood the last time. Mrs. Martinez stood there, her hair askew, her eyes wide. A torrent of angry Spanish poured out of her mouth, and for an awful moment, Hallam was afraid something had happened to Beth.

Then he heard laughter coming from inside the apartment, little-girl laughter, and he sighed with relief.

"Do you know what she did this time?" Mrs. Martinez demanded in English.

"No, ma'am, but I'm sure you'll tell me," Hallam said as he slid his hand inside his pocket and touched that check from the movie studio. It was a good thing he had it, he thought.

He might need it to pay for the damages. ●

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Coffee to Go

by Robert Campbell

Dorothy (everyone called her Dotty) was new to the area; come from upstate to the village that served the junior college where, she told her new landlady, she meant to study photography; a pretty, fresh-faced, go-getting sort of girl who was apparently so used to making her own way in the world that she'd found a job in the coffee shop first and accommodations at the rooming house second.

Her second day in town and she was already working the late shift, wondering why they bothered staying open after nine, all the way to ten-thirty, with so few customers or even pedestrians on the streets. It had been as quiet as a graveyard since eight except for the hatless man in the long overcoat sitting at the table in the corner at the back, which wasn't all that far away, the coffee shop being as tiny as it was.

He was a big, dark man with slicked-back hair parted in the middle and heavy brows that grew over his eyes like moss.

She'd asked him twice if he wanted his cup heated up, but he'd shaken his head; hadn't even answered her; glared at her sideways from interesting eyes the shape of narrow almonds

The town of Carmel, California is home not only to Robert Campbell, whose fourth story this is for *EQMM*, but to Bob Irvine, who debuted in our Department of First Stories. As if the natural beauties of Carmel were not enough to attract a writer, there is the company of other writers, enjoyed almost daily by Robert Campbell and Bob Irvine over morning coffee. It was at such a group coffee session that the following story was born, when Mr. Irvine recounted to Mr. Campbell an incident at a local shop.

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that seemed to wrap around the corner of his face above sharp cheekbones. He'd spoken to her twice, once to order the coffee, once to ask her—no, tell her—to turn the music down.

Anybody watching would know that he was giving her the willies, sitting there staring into his cold cup every time she looked his way, but leaving her with the feeling that when her back was turned he was looking at her body, his eyes like ants crawling all over her legs and behind and back.

If anybody asked, she'd have told them that, given time, she'd learn all about him, she was sure, discover that he was a village character, silent, solitary, but harmless. Old Jerry or Jack or Harvey; a little strange, perhaps, since the old mother he'd lived with all his life had passed away.

She was washing out the empty coffeepots, wondering if she could hurry closing by ten minutes or so, when the door opened at her back, bringing a rush of cold air into the tiny shop. It startled her because her heart, without her really knowing it, was already anticipating some sort of shock, and that could have been why she felt such relief when she saw the bespectacled man in the blanket coat and hunter's hat standing there clapping his mittened hands together and grinning with pleasure at the warmth.

"It is cold. It is cooooold out there," he said. "Too late to get a cup of hot to go?"

"Hot coffee, tea, or cocoa?"

"Coffee, black, no sugar," he replied, sitting himself down on one of the porcelain backless stools at the counter.

Drying her hands on a towel, Dotty leaned across the marble and murmured, "I'm so glad to see you. I was getting a little nervous," cutting her eyes over her shoulder, indicating the hulking, forbidding figure back there.

"I got you," the newcomer said in a voice kept as soft and low as hers.

"Wouldn't you like to have your coffee here?" Dotty asked. "It'll warm you up better and quicker."

"I think I'll have that coffee here," he said in a regular volume of voice, taking off his wool mittens. "And maybe I'll have a sweet roll. One of the cinnamon whirls with raisins there."

"You want it heated?"

"I'll have it as it is."

She picked out the biggest of the whirls with a pair of aluminum tongs and set it on a plate before him with a knife and fork.

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Then she poured a cup of coffee from the last fresh pot and set that down as well.

"You know him?" she asked in a voice no more than a whisper, checking over her shoulder again to see that he hadn't crept up behind her.

He removed his hat, shook his head no. His thin sandy hair, tousled from taking off his hat, made him look like a kid even though she could see he was in his fifties.

"I'm new here. My second day," Dotty said, speaking up. "I don't know who's who in town. I haven't got a feeling for the customers or the people here yet."

"My name's Stanley," he said, sticking out his hand.

There was something so friendly about him; she took his hand and they shook, pumping their arms up and down like Midwesterners do, looking straight into the other person's eyes to let them know they were having real attention paid them.

"Everybody calls me Dotty," she said.

"Well, hellooooooo, Dotty," he said.

He was one of those clowns, she thought, one of those nice folks who try to make you smile the way they said things. It was a trick of speech meant to convey friendliness, drawing you into their feelings.

"So, do you think he's a stranger?" she asked, softly again.

"Well, he's strange to me," Stanley whispered, "but you're not to worry. I'll stick around until he leaves."

"That's very kind of you, but you don't have to do that. It's just me being a scaredy-cat, being new to town and all; not knowing what's what and who's who. Besides, you came in for a coffee to go, so I don't suppose you meant to sit around a coffee shop this time of night. I'm sure you have things to do or somewhere to go."

"Wellllll," Stanley said, as though considering the possibility, "I was just going to take this back to my place and have it while I watched television. I got a favorite show on in about fifteen minutes. Ran out of instant coffee and there's nothing open in town at this hour, so I just thought I'd grab a container of coffee and take it back, you know."

"You go on, then," Dotty said.

"I'm only five minutes away, across the park," he said. "There's three or four minutes of commercials and titles before the show begins, so don't you fret."

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He kept glancing over her shoulder as he spoke, as though all the chatter was merely cover for a surreptitious surveillance of the silently threatening, possibly dangerous, man.

"What's he doing?" Dotty whispered.

"Looking into the bottom of his coffee cup."

"Which he's been doing for the last forty-five minutes, staring into what's left of a cold cup," she said.

"I know," Stanley said.

"You do?"

"Well, yes. I passed by a while ago on my way home, before I remembered I had no instant coffee."

"If him drinking cold coffee isn't suspicious, I don't know what is."

"Well, we'll see," Stanley said, smiling and opening his coat as though meaning to stay as long as it might take.

"You're very nice," Dotty said.

"Don't mention it."

They almost jumped when five minutes later the man in back cleared his throat.

Dotty turned around fast, reaching for what was left in the pot, about to say something but not saying anything, because he was getting to his feet, selecting a bill from a money clip and throwing it on the table, turning around and walking toward them on his way to the door. Going past, he cast a single malevolent glance their way as though meaning them to share it between them.

Then he was gone and Dotty visibly relaxed.

"Oh my," she said. "I'm glad he's gone. He was giving me the willies."

"Strange-looking fella," Stanley agreed. "Probably a traveler passing through. A gambler on his way to Reno."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. He had a way about him. You notice his hands?"

"No, what about his hands?"

"The nails were trimmed and polished. Card players and dealers do that; very careful about their hands, they are."

"Well, learn something new every day," Dotty said, bustling about, getting the cup from the back table, tucking the dollar bill he'd left into her pocket, wiping down the table and hurrying back to clean up the back bar, putting the unsold pastries in a box and the box in the fridge, and picking up the last coffeepot.

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"You want what's left? I could put it in a container for you to have in front of the TV."

"No, thanks, the one cup was enough. More and I'll be kept awake all night."

The wind rattled the door and Dotty looked over his head into the dark beyond the glass, nervous again, and said, "I'm sorry, what?"

"I said I really didn't want the coffee that I had. I think what happened was that I must have started feeling lonesome without knowing what it was bothering me and came out hoping for a little conversation, a little human contact."

"I know what you mean. I'm alone a lot and I'm certainly alone here. I don't know a soul except Mrs. Sharp where I rent a room, and we've only exchanged as many words as it took to pay the rent and find out how the house rules worked."

She looked up when the wind rattled the door again with the same startled look.

"You're worried he could be waiting out there somewhere in the dark, aren't you?" Stanley said.

"I guess I am."

"Well, don't. I think we're both just imagining things."

"It's kind of you to include yourself but it's just me that's acting like a silly fool. You better get going; you're going to miss the beginning of your show."

He was already off the stool, buttoning up his coat, smashing the hat down on his head so his ears were covered by the flaps, putting on his black leather gloves.

"You're sure?" he said. "I could wait around till you locked up, if you want."

"No, no, you've done enough already. Just nervous being new and all," she said, cutting herself off short as though she remembered she'd said the same thing more than once before.

"All right, then," he said, glancing at the clock on the wall. "If you're sure."

"I'm certain. I'll be all right."

"Absolutely, posiluuuuutely," he said, grinning, making a funny phrase to cheer her up.

"Go on, go on. I don't want you to miss your program."

"All right, then," he said, and with some small, lingering show of hesitation and indecisiveness, finally gave in, waved, and left the shop.

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Dotty stood there for a minute doing nothing, except listening maybe, then rinsed the pot and his mug, got her coat, turned out all the lights except for a night security light, pulled the shades, and went out the door, locking it behind her.

She started off down the street toward the rooming house at a brisk pace. The cold bit her nose and fired her cheeks. She huffed, keeping herself company with the sounds and imagining the puffs of vapor were guardian angels walking along with her.

At the corner, where the only traffic light in town went through its changes from green to yellow to red and back to green again with measured patience in spite of the fact that not a moving vehicle was anywhere to be seen and not a person except for herself, she paused and looked four ways.

Not a soul.

She crossed the street and walked along with the little village park lying dark and whispery at her left. She could hear the flutter of birds and the slither of little creatures in the leaves and brush. She didn't hear the footsteps until the last second, when they lost their stealth and rushed at her like a storm.

He had her arms pinned to her sides with one of his arms and his hand was over her mouth and nose so that she couldn't scream, could hardly even breathe—a hand that was gloved in leather and she remembered, almost with a feeling of triumph, how she'd noticed that Stanley had walked in wearing wool mittens and walked out wearing leather gloves.

So she'd been ready but, even so, his attack had come as a shock.

She didn't struggle; she went limp, so that he had to hold her up. There was another rush of footsteps, a guttural cry of attack, and the sound of a blow like that of a melon cut in half with a hammer.

She was free, and turned to see Stanley lying on his face in the leaves, the dark man pressing a knee into his back, trying to put handcuffs on his wrists.

"You could give me a hand here, Dot," the dark man said.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I'm just stunned. I just can't believe a tip we got out of a thousand tips finally caught us a serial rapist and killer."

Harry dragged Stanley to his feet. Stanley's hat had fallen off and his hair stuck up all around, but he didn't look like a tousled boy or a friendly villager anymore. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE JESTER AND THE SAINT

by Alan Gordon

It is folly, perhaps, writing a history of a society that would prefer to remain unknown. Yet who better than a fool to take on such a task, to throw a pebble into the Adriatic hoping it might cause a wave to wash upon Egyptian shores. And our little troupe must keep its history if it wishes to continue to be effectual. So, to those of you who may read this, I salute you all, jesters and jongleurs, troubadours, trobairitzes and trouvères, minstrels, mimes and minnesingers, players of the Great Farce, my brothers and sisters of the Fools' Guild.

And if ultimately we are defeated, or *(mirabile visu!)* achieve our goal and happily disband, then this may be read in wonder-

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ment or scepticism by anyone who chances upon it, that he may learn of us, of the parts we have played, the history behind the history, and know that we strove without thanks, without expectation of success in this world or reward in the next, meeting our ends without dignity, shivering in a rain-filled ditch or succumbing to the assassin's dagger. And pray, my unknown reader. Pray for the souls who made others laugh and, more importantly, sought a world where others could laugh. For underneath the motley, the makeup, and the masks hid the most dedicated band of Christian soldiers that ever walked the face of this world. We did not crusade for Rome, nor did we take up pig bladders on staves for Byzantium. We regarded both with disdain, for they had lost their way. We looked instead to the First Fool, our Savior. We were fools for Christ's sake, as St. Paul had said, and the philosophical debate that began at the Council of Nicaea, whether God was three entities or one, did not interest us.

You might think that our goals and those of the Franciscans would coincide, then. Well, it's a long way from Francis to the Franciscans, even so short a time after his death. Already Rome is converting him into legend, the better to tame him. For they couldn't do it while he was alive. I hear Celano is already revising the *Vita,* removing all traces of humanity and ransacking Irish and Coptic folklore for inspiration. Pity. I always thought you could win more converts by showing how an ordinary man became good, rather than by making him a saint from birth. It's hard to be a saint all the time. But not according to the official historians of the Church, those noted sticklers for accuracy.

There seems to be no place Alan Gordon's imagination won't take him. Whether he's writing a futuristic piece about musicians on an alien planet, as in the 1994 story for *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* "Digital Music," which won that magazine's readers award, or following the adventures of a jester in thirteenth century Assisi, his sense of place is unerring. The author lives in Forest Hills, New York. This is his fifth published crime story. ✝

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Giving credit where it is due, he did better than most. But I knew him before he was a saint, as the old troubadour joke goes. Oh, he wanted so much to be one of us, not knowing our true purpose. He fancied himself a singer, aspired to motley. Even after his great revelation, he kept it up. God's Fool, God's Troubadour, as if calling him one made it so.

I met him in 1198. He would have been fifteen or sixteen. I was passing through Umbria on my way back to the guildhall, having successfully completed my last assignment on two levels. Overtly, I entertained for several months at a great palace in Apulia, pleasing the lord there so much that he rewarded me with a weighty purse. Covertly, I caused two warring factions in the town to see the lunacy of their quarrel, while encouraging a marriage between members of each who, quite frankly, needed little encouragement. And so a peace was created where none had been before, and maybe it will last a few years. And I didn't have to kill anybody. This time.

Not wishing to empty my purse too quickly, I had spent a pleasant summer night on a bed of pine needles in a forest. I was hoping to make Arezzo in two days and inveigle my way onto a boat or barge as far as Firenze. I woke up to hear birds singing and, to my bewilderment, someone lustily bellowing a Provinçal drinking song. Before the fog cleared from my brain, he stomped into the clearing in which I reposed, stopping in midstride and midlyric as he saw me.

He was a well-favored youth, black-haired and black-eyed. His clothes suggested some prosperity, as the cloak was new and unpatched, while the boots were sturdy and well-made.

"Good morning, young sir," I greeted him both in langue d'oc and in the Tuscan dialect. "Are you of these parts? And if so, which parts are these? I had thought myself in Umbria, but think now to be in Provence. If the latter, I am come by miracle, for I was in Umbria when I went to sleep."

"And still are," he replied, laughing. "I apologize for disturbing your rest. I thought myself to be the only human for miles." I stood, removed my own cloak, folded it carefully, and placed it in my pack. "A troubadour!" he exclaimed with delight upon seeing my costume. "No, a jester," he decided after glancing at my face, which still bore traces of my makeup.

"Correct. And well met, good sir. May I have the honor of learning your name?"

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"I was christened Giovanni de Bernardone, son of Pietro de Bernardone, a cloth merchant of this area. But my father calls me Francesco, for I have a French mother and, he says, a French disposition."

"And a fine French voice, Monsieur Francesco. I have sung that song with entire rooms of troubadours, and you sing it as well as any of them."

"I thank you, Master Fool. And I call you that only because you have yet to return the honor of the knowledge of your identity. What name do you go by?"

"I go by all of them until I stop at one that suits me. Pray, monsieur, what is the nearest town?"

"Assisi."

I thought for a moment. I liked to associate my *nom de bouffon* with the town I was in at any given time. "Then call me Balaam. That is as good a name for a fool as any. Now, tell me, monsieur, why are you singing in the forest at a time when farmers are at field and nuns at prayer?"

He began walking towards the road, and I fell into step beside him. "Tell me, do you think that every creature and plant now in the world was present in the Garden of Eden?"

Casual answers to even more casual questions have led many a man to a heretic's stake.

"If they were all present, then it must have been a wondrous large garden," I answered. "But His powers are infinite, so it must have been so."

"I sometimes think that Our Lord continues to create them anew," he says. "For I keep finding even in our own forests such creatures that were never mentioned in the telling, creatures that could not have been named by Adam, yet who miraculously appear just the same. So, I often come here at sunrise, to listen to the birds greet the morning and to commune with the works of our Creator, for I believe that He is with us here in everything we see."

A nature mystic, I thought. Unusually young to be one, but a harmless enough vocation. He stopped abruptly, leaned against a beech trunk, and vomited.

"And," he continued, resuming his pace. "It helps clear my head after a night such as last."

"Communing with the grape, were you?" I said sympathetically. "Blessed is the fruit of the vine, as the Jewish prayer goes."

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"We blessed it many times, and crossed that blessing with a few more. So, good Balaam, tell me a merry tale."

"Give me some cloth for free," I replied. He looked puzzled. "A fool lives by his wits, young master. Were I to tell my tales freely, they would travel faster than I can, pausing only to be mangled in the retelling. I need to be paid for my art. I will sing for my supper, dance for my dinner, tumble for lunch, and cut a caper for a capon, roasted slowly with herbs over a lemonwood fire. But I will not perform gratis for a hungover youth in the forest."

"Alas, I have no funds after last night." His face brightened. "Barter, perhaps? I will trade you a song for a song."

"I doubt that you know any songs that I do not."

"This one I wrote myself."

"A bad trade. You ask me to take a pig in a poke. Your voice I can vouch for, but your compositional skills are unknown."

He thought for a while as we reached the road. "I will sing you the song, and you tell me what you think. And if you like it, you may sing me one. That will pass the time until we reach the gate, and I'll ask my father if you could entertain us tonight in exchange for food, lodging, and whatever silver he wishes to bless you with."

It was a fair offer, and as I was in no hurry to reach the guildhall, I accepted. He sang an earnest if maudlin paean to Nature and her constituents. He was not without talent, but it needed work. I suggested a few improvements, which he took with grace and good humor, then I unslung my lute, tuned it, and sang a chanson that lasted until we reached the walls of the town. The guard waved us through, staring curiously at my motley, as people do, and we soon arrived at the villa of the de Bernardones. He brought me to the stables. "You may leave your belongings here, if it suits you. The hayloft is quite comfortable, as many of the local lads will assure you."

After a night in the forest, a hayloft seemed a palace, and I told him so, but he wasn't listening, his eye having chanced upon a feather lying on the floor.

"Look at this!" he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it." It was a huge feather, nearly the length of my arm, colored black, gray, and white.

"Not a local bird?" I asked.

He shook his head decisively. "I know every bird that makes its nest in or passes through Umbria. None could produce a feather like that."

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I climbed the ladder to the hayloft and paused when I reached the top. "Here's something else unusual, monsieur," I said. Something in the tone of my voice brought him immediately up the ladder, where he looked and then froze in horror.

She was perhaps fifteen, and what was left of her clothing suggested a housemaid. She appeared to have been stabbed several times. The blood had soaked the surrounding hay, and what still clung to her body was thick and pasty to the touch. Her expression was one of unspeakable terror.

"Do you know her?" I asked softly. He gulped and gave a short nod.

"She's a servant in my household," he whispered. I scanned his garments and saw no sign of blood. His shock at seeing her seemed genuine, and he seemed upon short acquaintance too guileless to be dissembling.

"Alert your father and summon the guards," I advised. "And a priest." He nodded and nearly fell back down the ladder. I followed him.

"Aren't you going to stay with her?" he asked.

"Can't help her, and I'd rather not be found with a body and no explanation. You'll vouch for me, I hope."

"Of course. Come with me."

He ran outside and collared a stableboy, ordering him to fetch his master. A gardener was dispatched to the guards. The two between them must have told a dozen others, for a crowd gathered within minutes.

Pietro de Bernardone arrived still tucking his tunic into his breeches. Merchants can afford to sleep late. He entered the stables accompanied by his son and the captain of the guard. I took advantage of the crowd's attention to duck behind a tree and reapply my makeup. They emerged moments later, the elder de Bernardone coughing into a handkerchief. By this time a man I figured by his administrative robe to be the podesta had arrived, trying to look officially concerned rather than rapaciously curious like the rest of the crowd. He, the two de Bernardones, and the captain conferred briefly. The captain looked around, saw me, and beckoned me forward.

"Your name, stranger?"

"I am Balaam the Jester, your worship," I replied, bowing low and jingling the bells on my cap for effect.

"What were you doing in there?"

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"Young Master de Bernardone was kind enough to offer shelter in exchange for an evening's entertainment. We came in and found the unfortunate young woman."

The elder de Bernardone scowled at his son. "Another stray, Francesco?"

"Please, Father. He has a ready wit and a deft hand on the lute."

The captain continued to regard me with animosity.

"This was most likely done by a stranger," he said. "And you're the only stranger in town."

"Captain, if I had done this, I would scarcely make my way here. I would make myself scarce, wouldn't I?"

"Well spoken, Fool," applauded the podesta. "But a man of your wit may stay on after the crime just to throw us off the scent."

"Are you armed?" continued the captain.

"Only by my wits," I replied, giving the standard answer. "Oh, and a knife for eating." I pulled it out of my bag and handed it to him. He held it up to the sun and examined it closely.

"No blood," he pronounced finally, and gave it back to me.

"Good, good," said the podesta. "Well, Pietro, you must have us over for the entertainment tonight."

De Bernardone scowled even more, but found himself inviting several no doubt influential locals to dinner.

"And you, Fool, must stay in town until we've gotten to the bottom of this horrible matter," added the podesta. "We would find any sudden departure on your part to be most incriminating." I bowed low. A priest came running up and entered the stable, followed by most of the principal players. Francesco came over to me.

"I'll find you somewhere else to stay," he whispered. "Perhaps in the servants' quarters. Terrible, isn't it?"

"It is. And I thank you for vouching for me. You do well under pressure, young master. I've seen many a battle-hardened Crusader turn ill at a sight so grisly."

"I had the good fortune to throw up earlier," he reminded me. "I suppose I should be thankful." He led me to the servants' quarters where one of the men showed me a bench where I could sleep. I thanked him, and they left me alone to think.

I didn't like the position in which I found myself. A stranger arrives in town to discover a murder, and has only a callow

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youth who'd been walking off a night of carousing as his vouchsafe—surely I would be the chief suspect, regardless. In any case, an easy scapegoat for the murderer to blame. I usually don't like to meddle in affairs that are neither my nor the Guild's concern, but this one seemed to be pulling me under in spite of myself.

An investigation seemed to be in order, but I faced another problem. I was a stranger, which would not only hamper my ability to nose out any information, but would prevent me from denouncing any local villains with any credibility. I decided to cross that bridge when I came to it, and to burn it quickly behind me.

I was not expected to perform until dinner, which left me several hours to fend for myself. I divested myself of my heavier gear, slung my working bag and lute over my shoulders, and walked to the piazza. I found at that time of my life that juggling was an effective way of concentrating my mind as well as drawing a crowd, so I pulled three clubs out of my bag and kept them aloft as I strolled about. A group of children gathered almost immediately, followed by servants and signóras who were roaming the stalls at the market. I continued walking and juggling as if oblivious, then let one of the clubs fly too far to catch easily. A woman screamed as I snatched it from over her head, but by this time a second was heading the other way. I mimed increasing frenzy as I ran around in a circle, turning near-misses into miraculous recoveries while the children shrieked with laughter. Finally, I allowed one of the clubs to conk me directly in the forehead. I toppled onto the ground, and the other two landed simultaneously in my outstretched hands. The crowd applauded, and I stood and bowed.

"Good day, fair citizens of Assisi," I said. "I am Balaam the Fool."

"If you're Balaam, where's your ass?" shouted a young man who smacked of privilege by his fine clothes and the fact that he had nothing better to do than heckle me. I turned away from him, bent over, and wiggled my bottom in reply. No one ever said we had to be sophisticated all of the time, and you take your straight lines as you find them. The crowd laughed, including the youth.

"Indeed, though I share the name with the Balaam of legend, I am not quite such a fool as he," I continued. "For he would

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have passed by an angel without noticing, but I see an angel now." The crowd looked about curiously. "You do not see her?" I said with amazement. "Then I shall show you." I walked up to a beautiful little girl who was staring up at me from the front of the group of children, bowed low, and kissed her hand. She giggled with delight, and I had them eating out of my hand for the rest of the performance.

It was a mildly profitable morning, and I gathered enough coin to buy a decent lunch. I did not want to delve into my Apulian treasure. A jester is expected to earn his way as he goes, so I lived up to that.

I entered a tavern off the piazza, procured a dish of stewed chicken, some bread that wasn't too stale, and some cheese that was, and sat among a group of men who were taking a break from repairing the cathedral. Needless to say, I was an object of curiosity to them, but it wasn't for the usual reason.

"They say you found the body of that poor Sofia," one of them said.

"Yes," I answered shortly, and gave them enough gory details to satisfy their curiosity. "A terrible sight. Did you know her?"

"She came here a few years ago with her father," said another. "Just a little girl at the time. He died, and Bernardone took her into service. He was very fond of her."

"Too fond," muttered a third, but the others shushed him.

"A good girl," continued the second man. "We would see her helping the cook do her shopping most days."

"And she went to church on Sundays," added the first. "Never missed it. She was a good girl, Sofia was."

"Then she's in heaven, gentlemen," I said, and we all crossed ourselves piously. "God grant that her murderer be as quickly dispatched."

"Not likely," said one of them bitterly. "She's not the first to die like that. Three girls in the past year. And no one's been caught for it. The captain's been doubling the guard at night, searching all the town, but nothing's turned up."

"Are there no suspicions as to who it is?" I asked.

They all looked around fearfully. "When the Devil walks, he leaves no footprints, or so they say," said one, and they all crossed themselves again. We finished our meal and went our various ways. The man who had been silenced by the others lagged behind and beckoned to me.

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"Many think that a man of wealth and power committed these horrors," he whispered. "That the captain is afraid to catch him."

"The podesta? De Bernardone?" I asked.

"Them, maybe one of the landholders outside the town. The podesta has the captain in his back pocket; he could stall the investigation if it was leading to him or one of his allies." He seemed willing to say more, but we came in sight of a guard. He put his finger to his lips briefly and walked away.

As I passed by the cathedral, a man called, "You, jester." I turned to see the priest who was at the stables earlier striding angrily towards me. I bowed low, and he caught me off guard with a backhanded blow that sent me tumbling in ways I do not normally tumble.

"I can tell you're a man of Christ," I said as I wiped the blood from my lip.

"How dare you!" he thundered. "A girl is murdered, and not an hour later you tell jokes in the piazza. Impious ruffian!"

"Yes, good Father, a girl lies dead, and the farmers keep on plowing. A girl lies dead, and the weavers keep weaving. The apothecary grinds his drugs, the baker bakes, the ropemaker braids his hemp, and the cooper rolls out another barrel to sell, all while a girl lies dead. Why should a jester be the only one not to practice his profession when there's a murder?"

He was livid. "Sacrilege! That you should care so little for one of God's perfect creatures. I am here to tell you, Fool, that the man who killed her is damned, and if my prayers have any power, he shall burn while he's still alive."

He looked straight at me when he said this. I knew better than to bait him, but I did it anyway.

"Such passion for a man of the cloth," I said idly. "What did she confess to you that has so stirred your blood?" I was reintroduced to the paving stones, though I was ready for it this time and broke the fall without much damage. I got up to see him running away, sobbing. His name was Father Arnolfo, I learned from an old woman selling beads from a stall, and he had been known to yearn for Sofia before his family forced him, as the youngest son, into the priesthood. To have so much passion bound up in cloth was a terrible thing, she said. I bought some beads and moved on.

Very possible, I thought. Celibacy does strange things to passionate men, and there were many accounts in Guild records of

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priests gone mad. All hushed up, of course. And black cowls make effective cover at night.

The market provided me with gossip but no useful information. Sofia was suspected of having lovers; she was a virgin who would become a nun soon; she was an orphan with no family; she was the secret daughter of the elder de Bernardone.

I gave up and went back to the villa. I came upon a manservant who was changing into fresh clothes for the evening's festivities and waylaid him.

"Tell me, friend, what manner of people will be here tonight? I need to know what kind of performance they will demand."

"There's the master," he said. "And the young master. The podesta, Signórs di Cambio and Grande, they've both got estates outside of town. And their wives, of course. And the captain's coming. And the bishop, maybe one or two of his people. That's it."

"And are they a sophisticated group? Have they traveled, and would they appreciate some big-city humor?"

"Ah, now that's a hard one. The master goes back and forth to Provence, of course, and the young master sometimes goes with him, learning the trade and all. The bishop goes down to Rome every now and then. The podesta's traveled. He went on the last Crusade, fought Saladin himself to hear him tell it, which he does over and over. The captain was in on that one, too."

"He fought with the podesta?"

"No, he wasn't here then. The captain's from Venice. He was a mercenary, before that a merchant, used to trade all over the Mediterranean. Went broke, became a mercenary, went on a ship with Philip Augustus's lot, met the podesta. Saved his life, they say, so the podesta brought him back here and made him captain. And that's all I know about that."

"It is a considerable amount, good friend, and I am grateful. I shall be sophisticated enough to flatter the ladies into thinking they're sophisticated, and simple enough for everyone to understand me. And then I'll come back here and tell you fine fellows all the dirty stories."

He brightened. "As to that, sir, we know a few ourselves. I'm fancied quite a jokester myself back here."

"Then we shall have a duel of wits, my friend, and he who is still standing at the end of it didn't drink enough."

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He guffawed, clapped me on the back, and went about his chores.

I was settling down for a short nap when Francesco poked his head into the room. "May we speak?" he whispered. I beckoned him in. He sat on the end of my cot. "I can't stop thinking of her," he said, looking down. "She was such a pretty, lively maid. She used to tease me endlessly when we were younger. I can't believe that anyone would want to kill her."

"What about the other girls who were killed?" I asked. "Why would anyone want to kill them?"

"No one knows," he said. "One was a farmer's daughter, one was traveling with a merchant from Pisa. I cannot believe that such sinfulness exists in the world."

"It does, unfortunately."

"I suppose she presented too great a temptation for the man."

"Nonsense," I said sharply. "Whoever it was, he's a monster with no need for inspiration. He carries his evil with him."

"I stand rebuked," he said. "You're right, of course. It's just that I have never encountered anything like this. Sometimes I think I'm better off with animals than with people. They only kill for food."

"Maybe, young master. Anyway, there's the dinner bell. Go join your guests. I'll be along shortly."

I had half a notion to recruit him for the Guild, but thought him still a bit young. A decision I have regretted since, but not chief among my regrets. That was still to come.

It's one thing to perform before anonymous crowds when a girl's been murdered, but quite another to perform before the master of the household where she had lived. A jester depends on his timing and knowing his audience. I chose to become a troubadour for the evening, singing heroic and mournful ballads, none too close to the unspoken theme of the day, none in opposition to it. I threw in a few songs of courtly love for the ladies, and retired to genuine applause. I learned nothing at the dinner to help me.

But I had a theory now, one that needed evidence. So, after I bested the braggart manservant in ribald rivalry, I waited for them to fall asleep and pulled out my traveling bag. How does a jester disguise himself, fellow fools? By taking off his makeup and motley, of course. Without them, I am a nondescript fellow.

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On with some dark clothing, and I was ready to lurk among the shadows of the town.

And shadows there were. The captain had doubled the guards on the walls and gates, which meant that patrols in the town itself were sparse. That suited my purpose neatly. I passed through a series of alleyways until I located the house of my quarry, listened at a window, and confirmed that no one was there. I slipped inside, searched it thoroughly, and found what I was looking for. I rearranged things as they had been, slipped back out, and made my way back to the servants' quarters.

Well, a problem solved, and another awaiting. I had verified to my own satisfaction the identity of the murderer, but as a transient alien was in no position to convince the town. I was up all night thinking about it.

And then, in the morning, a miracle occurred.

I was sitting on a low wall in front of the villa when Francesco came by, stumbling as if in a trance.

"Young master?" I called to him. He started and stared at me, momentarily unable to remember who I was.

"Oh, Fool," he whispered. "It's unbelievable."

"What is?"

He shook his head suddenly and started running towards the center of the town. "I must tell them!" he shouted.

I followed him, concerned for his safety. He staggered through the streets to the piazza, then dashed across it, scattering children and pigeons in his wake, seized a rope that dangled in front of the cathedral, and started ringing a bell suspended above the entrance. "People of Assisi, hear me!" he shouted over and over. Not surprisingly, people did, leaving the market, the taverns, the cathedral itself, laughing and pointing at the noble youth apparently gone mad. He stopped his bell ringing and addressed them in awed tones.

"A vision . . . No!" he corrected himself. "A miracle! It was . . ." He stopped, seemingly unable to find the words. Come on, boy, I urged him silently. Get it out.

"I was in the woods south of the town," it started pouring out of him. "I went to listen to the birds, to pray and think about the evil that dwells within us." You'll lose your crowd with that patter, I thought, but they hung in there and listened to him. "And then . . . it was a miracle! A robin spoke to me! Not like a bird, but in the voice of a man. No, not a man, an angel. A saint!"

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Cries of wonder from the crowd. The hook was set. "He said, 'In the name of St. John the Evangelist I am come to warn you. Listen to the birds, they shall lead you. One who has slaughtered such birds for their plumage wears it now to slaughter your maids. Seek the owner of the feather.' " The crowd looked puzzled. He reached into his doublet and produced the long feather he had found in the stable. "This was worn by Sofia's murderer," he explained. "I found it near where we found her body. Whosoever has feathers to match this killed her."

"The captain!" someone shouted.

"Where?" asked Francesco.

"No, no, he's the one." A burly man strode to the front. "When he came here, I helped carry his trunks to his quarters. I saw him remove a tunic covered with these feathers. I'd never seen their like, but he quickly hid it in his closet, and I never thought about it until now. It's the captain."

"The captain!" screamed others, and several ran in the direction of his quarters, returning with the garish garment with feathers clearly the match of the one in Francesco's hand. Dried blood splattered some of them.

The rest was simple and brutal. He was taken, tortured, and forced to confess. The details of his perversions and his frenzies I leave to your imaginations. Suffice it to say, he was sentenced quickly to depart this earth, and splattered it with blood one last time.

I did not stay for that. My job was done, and I preferred not to arouse anyone's curiosity. Francesco walked me to the north gate.

"I confess, good Fool, that I heard of such wonders, but never thought to see them for myself," he commented.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, young master. Perhaps He will speak to you again. Perhaps not. You were His chosen vessel for ending a great evil, and maybe now that it's over, you will not be called upon again."

He looked disappointed, and I clapped him on the back. "Cheer up, monsieur. You have much in life to look forward to. The world awaits you. And I hope to meet you again someday."

He brightened. "I would like that. I would like to learn more of what it is to be a fool."

"Maybe we'll teach you. Until then, be merry, Francesco. Despite recent events, I truly believe the world is deserving of

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laughter and song. Your voice is a gift to be shared. Be generous with it."

We shook hands, and I left Assisi. We did cross paths a few times thereafter, but you know the way he took. Taken ill during the Papal Wars, a fever induced a revelation, or so the stories go. His first vision, they say. Perhaps. I've spent many a fevered night hearing all manner of angels and demons, but in the morning I was sober again. I say his first miracle was when a robin in the forest spoke with a saint's voice, and thanks to that we now have legions of fat gray friars arguing over who has betrayed his principles more. Oh, there's some that do some good, and God knows they're not as bad as the Dominicans (and the stories I can tell you about them, fellow fools!), but they've become just another branch of Rome now.

And it's all my fault. For I recognized the feather. It belonged to the ostrich, a fantastical creature that gallops across the African plains. And the only person in town who could possibly have traveled there was the captain, the one-time Venetian merchant. He also would have the greatest ease in avoiding the guards, for it was he who determined their patrols. It was his quarters that I targeted that night.

And then it was a simple thing to follow a simple boy into the woods. The bird spoke with my tongue, of course, for any fool who can't throw his voice was never meant for motley in the first place. And so, with the best intentions in the world, I created a saint.

The memory haunts me. I hear him singing in that boyish voice that song which would be transformed into the "Hymn of the Sun." I was secretly pleased when I heard it in its final form that he adopted some of my suggestions, but that doesn't compensate for all the efforts the Guild has been forced to make to counter these holy simpletons. I wish we had recruited him first, but who knew?

Brothers and sisters, I salute you across the years and pages, and bid that you remember a jester with no particular name, and pray for him. And if we meet in the hereafter, greet me with our ancient password and motto: *Stultorum numerus infinitus est*—the number of fools is infinite! ●

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BY DOUG ALLYN

Lizzie's Lover
BY RUTH RENDELL

Breakout from Mistletoe Five
BY JAMES POWELL

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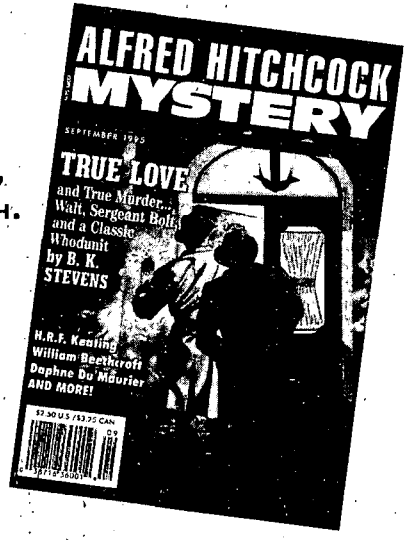

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